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VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE
(Solitaire)

By the same author

MOJAVE
FIG TREE JOHN
PEOPLE ON THE EARTH
BURRO ALLEY

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VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

(Solitaire)

by

EDWIN CORLE



Esse est percipi

BERKELEY

O the joy of my soul
leaning pois'd on itself . . .

WHITMAN

JONATHAN CAPE
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CONTENTS

I	THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR	11
II	ARROYO	45
III	VERISIMILITUDE	69
IV	HAVE	118
V	HAVE-NOT	157
VI	MARY — MARY —	210
VII	OBLIGATION	266
VIII	A LAW OF PROBABILITY	290

To
Mary Alice Clarke

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE
(Solitaire)

CHAPTER I

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

I

THERE were only two other people in the street car. Both grown-ups. There wouldn't be any more now because it was too near the end of the line. Six blocks to go. Rattlety-rattle clink-clink, five blocks to go, rattlety-rattle clink-clink. It always made the same noise. It was a busy little street car going about its job with a serious rattlety-rattle clink-clink, bobbing slightly and weaving slightly so that you sway back and forth with it.

Once it had done the last twelve blocks without anybody making it stop to get off or get on. But that was — was — what was that word Miss Roberts ('it doesn't make any material difference') had used? — exceptional. That was it. Twelve blocks without a stop. That was ex-cep-tion-al. It was a game to be played every day. Well, no, she only played it on the days she rode home from school. But that was five days out of seven — except the days Mother met her in the Pontiac. Five out of seven would be a ma-jor-i-ty. Exceptional majority, rattlety-rattle clink-clink.

Twelve blocks without a stop was a record day; this time it would be only six and then the end of the line. Now it was four and a half blocks to go, four blocks to go, and then — no!

A stop.

What for? She didn't want to get off. The conductor knew her and she rode with him every day from school and he knew that she always rode to the end of the line. And those two grown-ups — they didn't want to get off. Yet the street car was stopping.

A weary rattlety-rattle ended with an abrupt clink. Larchmont Street. That was a funny place to stop. Larchmont, then Maple, then Sudbury, then Palm Drive and that was the end of the line. Who could be so silly as to get on at Larchmont Street just to ride four blocks and then get off again? She looked out the window.

An old man was waiting beside the car as it came to a stop. He walked a few steps, past the window, toward the rear platform. You could tell by the way he walked that he was old. People were either young like yourself, or they were grown-ups, or they were old people. He was probably very old — maybe as much as fifty. Imagine being as old as *that*! It was hard to think about it. She might grow up and be fifty some day. A long time ago — about nine months it was now — she had become ten. And that was exciting because that put two numbers in your age when there had been only one before. There wasn't much difference between eight and nine, but ten was *ten*. And in three more months the zero would be changed to a one and she would be eleven. There was still a long time to wait before she would be in her teens and really grown up. And as for *fifty*! Well, only old ladies were fifty.

She squirmed in her seat and looked toward the rear platform. The old man had grasped the rail and pulled himself on board. The conductor gave the bell two little rings and up front the uninterested motorman heard the signal and started the car again. A long rasp became a rattlety-rattle. Maple next. Four to go. It was nowhere near the record. Maybe to-morrow they'd do thirteen without a stop.

The old man walked unsteadily toward the front of the car. The rear half of the car had seats set in pairs facing forward. The front half of the car had seats facing centre so that you rode sideways. She always liked the seats in pairs. Then you could have a window to yourself and you rode sitting forward. The

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

two grown-ups didn't care, for they were two ladies and they were sitting on the seats facing centre. They had been sitting there a long time, ever since the car had been crowded, and probably they didn't care enough to move. They talked all the time, first one and then the other, but most of the time the rattle of the car kept you from hearing what they said. And when the car stopped they lowered their voices, and still you couldn't hear, even if you wanted to. One of them had a hat with red cherries on it, and the other had a shopping bag full of groceries which she held on the seat beside her. Once in a while she straightened it up to keep it from upsetting.

The old man came along the aisle grasping with his left hand the seats set in pairs in order to brace himself. He walked on forward to the seats facing centre and he sat down almost opposite the two ladies. Funny looking old man. He was poor. Poor people didn't live in this part of the city, so he must live somewhere else. His clothes were old and mused and threadbare. The trousers didn't match the coat. His right arm was bent at the elbow and the elbow was worn through. And he kept his right hand inside his shirt as if he itched and were scratching himself all the time. It wasn't nice to scratch yourself. Not in public, anyway.

The conductor came along the aisle and held out that funny little silver thing that you press a nickel into and it registers with a ping. If you just put the nickel in slowly you can feel it grab the coin out of your hand and swallow it. Ka-ping, it goes, and your nickel goes, too. The silver thing was being held in front of the old man and the old man was fishing in his left-hand trouser pocket for his nickel. He seemed to have an awful time finding it, and he still kept his right arm against his body with his right hand inside his shirt. It must have been a giant mosquito if it itched that much and itched all the time. She laughed. And then she stopped laughing at once. It wasn't nice to laugh at old

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

people. You must always be kind to old people. You were supposed to feel sorry for them all the time and be helpful.

That very afternoon during the story half-hour Miss Roberts had read the little Spanish fable about the parents who were cruel to the old grandfather because he was so old he always spilled his soup at the table. The poor old grandfather had to eat all by himself in the kitchen. Then, one day, the parents saw their little boy hard at work carving a wooden bowl and a wooden spoon. And when they asked him why he was making them he said, 'When you're old and spill your soup I'll make you eat out of this the way you treat grandfather'. And that taught them the lesson that everybody would be old some day and that old people should not be treated unkindly, but should be given every courtesy, and after that they let grandfather eat at the table again and he was careful and never spilled his soup. Of course, *she* didn't *have* a grandfather. And it was only a story anyway. But if she *had* a grandfather she would look after him and be extra quiet when he was around, and never laugh at him.

She sat erect and set her mouth in a straight line. Serious — respectful — that was the way you were supposed to be. But whenever you were that way you always wanted to laugh all the more. Your insides laughed and you giggled. And then you got frowned at and you always choked the giggles back and tried hard to think of something unpleasant so you could feel sad and well-behaved.

The conductor was getting impatient. He poked the silver thing closer to the old man's face. The old man leaned to one side in order to fish the easier in his pocket for his nickel, but he still kept his right hand inside his shirt. Maybe he didn't itch after all; maybe something was wrong with that hand. Shrivelled up — or cut off, maybe. Ugh! No wonder he hid it.

Now they were passing Maple. If he didn't get that nickel out soon they'd be at the end of the line. Only Sudbury and

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

Palm still to go. The conductor was angry now. You could tell it. He said something to the old man and pointed to the slot in the silver thing where you put the nickel in. Still the old man was trying to find a nickel — why didn't the conductor have more patience? You were always supposed to be patient when things didn't happen in a hurry just the way you wanted them to. Impatient people were often selfish people, Miss Roberts had said. Probably nobody had ever told the conductor that.

Or perhaps the old man didn't have any nickel and was just pretending to search for one in order to get a free ride for a few blocks. Maybe he was so poor he didn't even have five cents. He certainly didn't look as if he had five cents. When people were old and poor you always felt sorry for them and you contributed to the Community Chest and took them turkeys and cranberry sauce on Thanksgiving Day. But if they came up the drive and around to the back door begging for money Mother always told Celia that she hadn't anything to give to-day and then Celia told them that Mother wasn't home and they went away again.

The old man had given up the pretence of fishing in his pocket. He looked at the conductor and seemed about to speak. Then he looked down at his right arm and quickly looked up at the conductor again. Something was wrong with that arm, all right. It must be what you called de-formed. The conductor was frowning and saying something out of the corner of his mouth. The old man was shaking his head 'no'. The conductor was pointing to the front of the car where it said 'Exit'. Not only was this old man an old man, but also he was poor, and he was de-formed. All he wanted was a ride and the conductor was telling him that he couldn't have a ride and that he had to get off. That was too bad. All this unhappiness was taking place over nothing but a nickel. It was a pity. It was a very, very great pity.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

But there was a way to fix it. If somebody put a nickel in the silver thing, that would satisfy the conductor and the old man could have his ride. It was as easy as that! Funny she hadn't thought of it before. In her purse were three nickels. Altogether they would buy one chocolate soda, but Mother would always give her another nickel if she wanted it. And Daddy would give her a quarter if she asked for one. So one of these nickels was going into the silver thing and all this pity would be ended.

She left her seat and went to the conductor. He had a hand under the old man's bad arm and the old man didn't want him to touch it. But the silver thing with the slot was right there in the conductor's other hand, and without looking at the conductor or the old man she slipped the nickel into the slot and the silver thing went ka-ping and the nickel was gone. Then she returned to her seat.

The conductor was surprised and the old man leaned back against the cane of the seat. The two grown-up ladies had seen the whole thing and they spoke even above the rattle of the street car. 'Why, what a remarkable child,' said the one with the cherries on her hat, and the one with the groceries said, 'What a good little girl.' They looked at her and smiled and the old man gave her a look, too. But she looked out the window as the car slowed down to cross Sudbury Avenue. The conductor went back with the silver thing to the rear platform and called 'Sudbury'. She continued to stare out the window in order to avoid looking at the old man and Cherries-on-the-Hat and Groceries because she didn't want to be smiled at. You were always supposed to forget it as soon as you did something nice for poor people. You always acted as if you did it because it was the thing to do. The way Mother said to Daddy once at dinner, 'The Community Chest man was here to-day and he's coming again to-morrow', and Daddy said, 'Oh, that pest'. But later Daddy gave the man ten dollars and it was never mentioned again. So she

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

sat and looked out the window at two boys on bicycles on Sudbury Avenue. You could always go into that place-where-you-were-alone if you wanted to. And nobody can ever know what you're thinking when you're there — nobody; not Mother or Daddy or Celia or Miss Roberts or anybody. Because *you* were all there was to that place and there wasn't room for anybody else there but you. It wasn't up or it wasn't down or it wasn't in or it wasn't out. It just was. Oh, of course, you knew all about other people when you were there; you could see them, all right, but they couldn't know much about you if you didn't want them to. It was pretty nice, that place-where-you-were-alone.

The car's rattlety-rattle carried it on toward Palm Drive and she couldn't see the boys on the bicycles any more. One of them had been riding no-handed. It must be hard to do that. Dangerous, too. Most boys could do it, though.

After a few seconds she turned her head and looked at the old man again. She wanted to see if he looked happy and grateful the way old people look in the life insurance advertisements and in the ads for Forest Lawn Cemetery. And he did, too. For he had turned partly toward her and was watching her, almost as if he were trying to say 'Hello', without quite opening his mouth. The two ladies were watching him, too. And no wonder, because at last he had taken his right hand out of his shirt front and it wasn't a crippled hand at all. He held both hands close together over his shirt front and slowly he opened his shirt just the least little bit. And then the funniest thing happened.

A little sharp nose, a pair of beady black eyes, a little brown head with long side whiskers looked out from inside the old man's shirt front. It was the strangest thing she had ever seen. Inside his shirt he had some little animal, a cute little black-eyed bewhiskered something — too big for a mouse and not big enough for a squirrel and it had been there all the time and that was why his hand had been there and why he couldn't get his

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

nickel out and why he couldn't even explain. For two seconds the sharp face and the black eyes peered out from the old man's shirt, and she stared in amazement and the old man smiled back with appreciation of her amazement. He looked down at the little animal within his shirt and she smiled with delight and all of a sudden they were both startled by a shriek.

Then another shriek and a series of screams. Cherries-on-the-Hat was scrunching her feet up under her on the cane seat, screaming, 'Oh! Take it away! Take it away!' And Groceries, screaming, too, ran forward in the car to the front platform and grabbed the astonished motorman by the arm and shrieked meaningless words at him and pointed back at the old man.

The motorman stopped the car.

The conductor came running forward.

The old man seemed bewildered by all this sudden excitement, and certainly it was a surprise to her, too. But Groceries was explaining to the motorman and Cherries was talking fast to the conductor and pointing at the old man's shirt, and all four of them seemed to be in a state of great concern. Words came so fast it was hard to tell who was saying what. 'In his shirt — live rat — dirty old man — take it away — don't let it out — put him off — do something about it — call a policeman — vile beast — filthy thing — ' and a lot more words all mixed up together.

The conductor grabbed the old man by the shoulder.

'What do y'mean, scarin' these ladies?'

'Where is it?' asked the motorman.

'Put him off the car,' said Groceries.

'Don't let him come near me!' said Cherries-on-the-Hat.

'Where you hidin' it?' demanded the conductor.

The old man was unable to say anything. He sat in terror, hunched up on the seat, his right hand inside his shirt. He looked from one to the other and he trembled slightly. He acted as if he were afraid of being struck.

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

'The little girl saw him,' said Cherries-on-the-Hat.

'The child saw it, too,' said Groceries. 'He made her look at it.'

The conductor paid no attention to them. 'You get off o' this car,' he said. He pulled the old man by his coat collar and the ladies moved farther away. The motorman said, 'Put him off and give him his fare back'.

'He never paid no fare,' said the conductor. 'I knew he was a phoney. The little girl paid it.'

'I'll get off,' said the old man weakly. 'Please let me off.'

'You're gettin' off, all right,' said the conductor, hustling him toward the front platform. 'Try any of this stuff on my car again and I'll have you arrested. Now git!'

The old man half fell off the two short steps. He walked to the kerb without looking back. All the people in the car watched him. Then the motorman returned to his place and the conductor walked down the aisle.

'He ought to be reported,' said Cherries.

'Loony, I guess,' said the conductor. Then he tried to laugh it off by grinning and saying, 'We get a lot of queer ones'.

The motorman gave the bell two clangs and the car moved forward with a rattlety-rattle clink-clink. 'Palm Drive,' said the conductor automatically, as he moved to the rear.

During all of this confusion she had sat in her seat. Things had happened so fast that it was impossible to do anything else. As the car moved on she had a last glimpse of the old man. He was sitting down on the kerb and he had his hand inside his shirt and he looked as if he were talking to himself. It seemed funny for people to make such a fuss over a cute little animal who lived in an old man's shirt front, but then grown-ups were so often excited about something that was commonplace and not even interested in something that was ever so thrilling. They were just that way. You never could tell about them. The way

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

Mother had conniption fits when she saw her balancing on one foot on the arroyo edge, but when they went to Boulder Dam both Mother and Daddy wanted her to look over, and it was ten times as far down to the bottom of the dam as it was from their garden on the arroyo top to the bottom of the arroyo. Grown-ups! And now a little thing like this old man and his pet — what was it? — a rat, one of the ladies had said. Just for that they had to throw him off the car. Now that didn't seem right, did it?

She squirmed in her seat to look back but the old man was hidden by a row of pepper trees. Anyway, the conductor hadn't really hurt him. The car came to the end of the line and she got up to get off and so did the two ladies. All three of them moved to the front platform and she could hear that the ladies were still talking about it.

'And such a shock for the child,' Groceries was saying.

'Such a little lady, too. What is your name, little girl?' asked Cherries-on-the-Hat.

'Virginia,' she said and left the car with two jumps.

'Virginia who?' asked Groceries, stepping off.

'Virginia Stewart,' she said.

'Stewart' — 'I wonder if I know your mother?'

'I don't know,' said Virginia.

'Do you live nearby?'

'Just a block over there.'

'Oh, one of the houses on the arroyo,' said Groceries. 'Money people,' she added to her friend.

'M'm,' said Cherries-on-the-Hat. 'Now are you sure you're all right, little girl?'

'Me? Why, certainly.'

'Then run along home now and try to forget what you saw in the street car,' said Groceries.

'And if you tell your mamma and she wants to know more

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

than you can tell her, you say to call Mrs. Sims at 1807 Crestline Road,' said Cherries. 'Can you remember all that?'

'Yes,' said Virginia.

'Then run along home,' said Groceries.

Virginia turned and ran three or four steps. Then she skipped a dozen steps more, and when she looked back the ladies were walking in the opposite direction. The street car was ready to begin its return journey. The conductor had gotten out and reversed the pole. She heard the two clangs that meant go ahead. Then from the distance came the rattlety-rattle and slowly it faded away.

From the end of the street car line it was one long block west on Palm Drive to Arroyo Drive and her house was the one just across the Drive on the corner of Arroyo and Palm. She skipped west, saying to herself, 'Rattlety-rattle clink-clink, rattlety-rattle clink-clink', until an imaginary passenger was waiting beside a palm tree. She slowed down and stopped with an abrupt 'clink'. She waited two seconds until the passenger was safely on (he was an old man with a basket of trained mice) and then she said 'Ting-ting', and started off again slowly at first, but soon reaching a full skip and saying in rhythm with the skip 'Rattlety-rattle clink-clink'.

'Rattlety-rattle clink-clink
And a basket of mice
So what do you think.'

It was going to be a record to-day and nobody wanted to get off or get on as she skipped across Arroyo Drive toward her own home. But just as she reached the entrance to the private drive, where the white mail box stood, the basket of trained mice fell open and mice ran all over the car and ladies screamed and the car stopped short by the white mail box while the conductor threw the old man off. Then all the mice went running after

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

him and one of them (a white one) ran off with a cherry from a lady's hat. Then everybody sat down and she said 'Ting-ting' and the car was about to start again.

To the south, down Arroyo Drive toward Sudbury she saw a figure she recognized. She stood and watched and the street car game lifted like a fog and was gone.

It was the old man, a long block away, but coming up Arroyo Drive toward her house, slowly, steadily, and as he came on she could see that he kept his right hand inside his shirt front. She knew why — a sharp nose and a pair of black eyes and side whiskers. She stood behind the hedge that lined the property and she watched the old man until he reached the intersection of Arroyo and Palm. He started across the street, catty-cornered, paused for a moment while a laundry truck tooted and whizzed by, and then crossed over. He was coming closer all the time and she peered over the hedge and held her breath.

Arroyo Drive ran north and south parallel to the arroyo proper on the west and all of the cross streets ended when they intersected the Drive. The west side of Arroyo Drive was dotted with houses which faced east, but the rears of which overlooked the arroyo. Between these houses were vacant lots, sometimes as many as three or four lots separating the developed properties. To the south of Virginia's house were several vacant lots and across this area the old man walked toward the arroyo edge. Peering over the top of the hedge which bounded her home Virginia could follow his progress. She knew that it wasn't nice to stare at people but it really didn't matter because there was nobody else around and the old man didn't know he was being watched.

At the back of the vacant lot there was a steep trail which led to the arroyo bottom. Nobody ever used it. Oh, boys sometimes, but hardly anybody, though it was a kind of trail, all right, and you could walk from the arroyo edge to the bottom

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

if you wanted to. And that's what the old man was doing. First his legs disappeared and then his body and then his head. As soon as he was out of sight Virginia ran up the private road toward the two-story white house in which she had lived as long as she could remember. The hedge surrounded the property except at the points where the private drive, making a half circle, came in and went out. Then there was a little road leading off the drive that went back to the garage where the Cadillac and the Pontiac were kept. This road was also used by delivery trucks — the Model Grocery man, the laundry man, the White Swan dry-cleaner, the bottled-water man, all used the side road past the house in order to get to the back door. She skipped up the curved drive and on down the side road because Celia was always in the kitchen in the late afternoon and the back door would be open whereas the front door was always locked.

At the rear of the house there was a large grassy yard containing a swing and a hammock and the big practical play house that she had gotten last Christmas. It was a completely furnished play house, even to little lamps and curtains and it had lights in it so that you could light it up at night. It was just a few inches higher than her head, and sections of the walls could be taken off so that the whole thing could be taken apart and folded up and packed in a large flat box. The first time she had seen it (way back last Christmas) it had been so lovely she had been afraid to touch it, and all Christmas day Mother and Daddy had gotten more fun out of it than she did. But later on when she became used to it and understood how to play with it, the newness wore off and she spent hours with it, cleaning it, sweeping it, entertaining in it, and dramatizing its daily existence.

Beyond the play house was the flower garden — rose bushes, chrysanthemums, dahlias, asters, African daisies, a bed of cannas, and in one corner Celia's herb garden. There were little paths through the flower garden and on one of them, near the roses,

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

Adachi, the Japanese gardener, was kneeling and digging in the earth, sometimes with a trowel and sometimes with his hands. Beyond the flower garden was the hedge which went around the entire property. And beyond the hedge the arroyo cliff fell off precipitously and there was nothing between the cliff at your feet and the golf club way over on the other side. She skipped past the play house and through the flower garden on the path where Adachi was kneeling. He didn't hear her coming.

'Hello, Adachi,' she said.

He looked up over his shoulder and bobbed his head up and down once.

'Miss V'ginia,' he said and went on digging with his hands and scraping with the trowel. She hurried on to the end of the garden. The hedge along the rear of the property was not as large as the hedge on the other three sides, partly because Adachi never gave it as much water and partly because the soil at the arroyo edge was rocky and things didn't grow there so well. It wasn't quite three feet high in contrast to the four-foot hedge everywhere else. She stood at the hedge and peered down into the arroyo. The afternoon sun was over in the west and all of the western half of the arroyo bottom was in the shade. She could step over the hedge by getting one leg over, straddling it, and then scrambling down on the other side. But Mother didn't like her to do that because it tore her clothes, and even worse than that, there was only about a yard of solid footing and then the cliff went down steeply and Mother was always afraid that she would fall over. Just to prove that she wouldn't fall over she had hopped one time all along the outer edge on one foot and never slipped once, and that had been the time Mother had had conniption fits from the upstairs hall window, so she never did that again. Remembering Mother's fear, she refrained from scrambling over the hedge in order to get a better view below. She merely leaned over it, bending it back and crushing it

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

against her stomach, not seeing Adachi's stare and frown, because she was looking below.

The old man had just reached the bottom where the trail met the floor of the arroyo and for a minute she could follow him. Then he disappeared into the chaparral and bushes that grew in the bottom and she couldn't see him any more. From the bottom of the arroyo up to where she stood would be about as high as a six-story house — or six-story office building, because who ever heard of a six-story house? The arroyo had never been of any interest to her. It had always been there, six stories deep and a long way across so that the golf club on the other side looked like a toy house. Once or twice in the rainy season, there had been water in the bottom of the arroyo — a regular river once when there had been a cloudburst and it had been interesting then. But to-day it was just the same old arroyo.

She straightened up, and the crushed hedge snapped back into a semblance of its former shape. The copper sun was nearing the hills to the west. In half an hour it would be sinking behind the horizon of Flintridge. She stood in the copper light and put her right hand in the waist of her dress. Then she turned and walked back to Adachi. He was standing up and collecting his tools, a shovel, a hoe, and a trowel, because it was time for him to go home.

'Bet you can't guess what I've got in my dress,' she said.

'Yiss,' he said.

'What?'

'Your hand.'

'Oh, sure, I've got my hand in there — but what else is in it?'

Adachi put all his tools under one arm and said nothing.

'Guess, Adachi.'

'Yiss,' he said and walked away toward the garage where stood his battered model A Ford. She watched while he flung the tools inside the Ford. He was an awful stick. Just a stick. He was always like that.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

A light snapped on in the kitchen and she could see the brown-complexioned Celia moving about inside. Suddenly she dashed toward the kitchen, past the play house, up the three back steps, letting the screen door bang behind her because she only had her left hand with which to push it open as her right was still inside her dress.

'Celia!' she shouted. 'Celia, what do you think I've got inside my dress?'

Celia looked up from shelling peas.

'Fleas,' she said.

'No! No!' Virginia danced up and down in glee. 'Guess again, Celia! Guess again!'

Celia guessed without looking. 'Whole world with a fence around it.'

'No! No!' shrieked Virginia. 'I'll give you a hint — it's got whiskers.'

'Mickey Mouse,' said Celia.

'You almost got it! You almost got it, Celia! It's a live rat!'

Celia looked up quickly.

'Huh,' she grunted. 'Clare to goodness if I didn't believe you for a minute. Now you go 'long an' wash your hands. Live rats — pooh — that all you got to think about?'

'I'm going to go tell Mother!' said Virginia. 'I bet she won't be able to guess, Celia!'

She ran out into the dining-room.

'Bet she's goin' to be right pleased, too,' said Celia to the swinging door.

Virginia ran through the house but Mother wasn't in the dining-room or the living-room or the library. She went up—

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

stairs taking two steps at a time, but Mother wasn't anywhere to be found. Then she remembered that this was Wednesday afternoon and Mother always played bridge on Wednesday afternoons. She would be at Mrs. MacLean's house, or Mrs. Blanchard's or Mrs. Hilton's, or if it was the tournament they'd all be at El Encanto Country Club because they always had tournaments at the club. So there was nobody to explain to about the strange old man and the pet rat. Later she'd tell Mother and Daddy both — and they'd be surprised to hear such a story.

She went to her own room. It was a large bright room at the rear of the house overlooking the garden and the arroyo and the white letters on the distant hills that spelled 'Flintridge'. Orange sunlight was pouring in the broad window making it hard to see much because of the glare. Later when the sun would sink behind Flintridge she could stare out toward the arroyo. But her room wasn't a good vantage point, even from the balcony that ran along outside the french doors. Though you were higher than the garden, you couldn't see below into the arroyo bottom as well as you could if you went to the back of the garden and leaned over the hedge. From the window, or even from the balcony outside the window, there was too much garden between you and the arroyo edge.

He had gone down there and he was probably down there now in that brush and the little rat was there, too. Its fur must be nice and soft. Once she had found a dead bird and the feathers on its breast were as soft as — as soft. She brought it home but Mother had made her throw it away. It was buried out there in the garden. She knew the exact spot even though it had been over a year ago. Worms eat dead things, they say. Ugh! Worms were horrid things.

'You worm,' she said aloud.

Turning from the window she looked around her room. It

was tidy. Celia had put everything away — books, pictures, the paints, the stamp album. The clock on her night table said half past four. What did she want to do now? On the table near the head of her bed was the small radio Mother and Daddy had given her for her birthday. She loved having her own radio entirely separate from the big one downstairs in the library. It played when she wanted it to play and it only played the things she liked and as long as she didn't turn it on too loud nobody cared how much she played it. Uncle Boojum and his family would be on at five. They used to be *awfully* funny but after Skidoo and Daisy invented the magic carpet it hadn't been so good any more. But she might as well hear what Uncle Boojum and Daisy and Skidoo were up to anyway. Once she had sent ten cents to the station for an Uncle Boojum button and she had worn it for days. Where was that Uncle Boojum button now? She hadn't seen it for weeks. Could it be lost?

'Boojum, Boojum,' she said aloud.

Then she whirled around and went to the bookcase. She knew what she had to do! The stamps!

Standing on tiptoes she reached the large stamp album which Celia had put on top of the bookcase because it was too big to fit in the shelves like the regular books. There were half a dozen loose stamps in the front which had to be pasted in their proper places and every day she kept forgetting to do it. She carried the album across the room and plunked it down on her bed. Then she lay on her stomach, resting on her elbows, the album propped up by the pillows. There was a green *Republique Française* thirty-five centimes and another French one ten centimes, both of which she had salvaged from a letter Mother had received from Paris. The green one had a woman on it who carried a bag in one hand and was throwing seeds out of it, or something that looked like that anyway. And the blue ten centime had a woman's head on it. Kind of ugly. The best

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

French stamp of all was the one with the big ocean liner on it. *Normandie*, it was called.

She opened the album to France. Doing pretty well, France was. But of course the United States was the best. It was so much easier to get United States. Daddy said a man named Mr. Farley had nothing else to do but make a new stamp every time the President wrote a letter. Well, whether Daddy liked Mr. Farley or not, Mr. Farley certainly improved the United States colours and shapes. The National Park series was beautiful and she had every one of them, too. But then Daddy didn't like Mr. Farley because he was part of the ad-min-i-stra-tion, and Daddy was against the ad-min-i-stra-tion because it spent all the people's money and never balanced the budget and did even worse things such as mixing government with business. There was something terrible about that but she wasn't quite sure just what.

Boojum — she mustn't forget to turn on Uncle Boojum. Balance the budget, Boojum. How do you suppose you balance a budget anyway? Not like balancing on one foot. You used arithmetic. Well, she really didn't like arithmetic very much — a boo and a jum to all arithmetic.

There's where the green one went. And there's where the blue one went. Next she had a red England that said 1d. and a reddish brown England that said 1½d. They were both alike except for the colour. The king was on them. They were duplicates of stamps already in the album. But they would be good to trade for something. Claire Ensley had a stamp album. Almost as many stamps as she had. They must compare them again some time soon.

Funny the way people always got their heads on stamps. But hardly any stamps ever had animals' heads. A rat's head would be cute on a stamp. With little whiskers and black eyes. Ratonia, one centime. Red and black would be pretty. Or red with a gold rat. That would be five centimes.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

There was a car in the drive.

She got up and went to the window. It was James, Celia's nephew. He had driven the Cadillac out of the garage and stopped it. He always did that so he could walk all around it and wipe it off. James didn't come every day — only on special days. Mother and Daddy were going somewhere to-night and James would drive the car. They didn't have a chauffeur all the time but James drove whenever they called him. She watched him dust the car for a few seconds and then she went back to the stamps. The next one was a beauty, a 30 Helvetia, a handsome white building surrounded by blue trees and snow-covered blue mountains in the distance. Why do they call Switzerland Helvetia?

By the time the Swiss stamp was in it was one minute of five and she leaned over, half sliding off the bed, and snapped her radio on. In a few seconds she could hear them talking about some kind of cereal which was always a nuisance, but it never lasted long, and then Uncle Boojum would be on. The cereal was called Barley Brownies and it seemed to be especially good for growing children. Moreover, Barley Brownies were high in vitamin B; Barley Brownies could be purchased from your nearest grocer; Barley Brownies cost but a few cents; Barley Brownies were good for your teeth; Barley Brownies were good for your bones; Barley Brownies made you grow; the American Medical Association recommended Barley Brownies (Hurry up with Uncle Boojum!); Barley Brownies were sun-ripened (What does that mean?) and each grain was a ray of sunshine; you could get a free sample by sending only ten cents to the factory; but whatever you did you must be *sure* to buy a box of Barley Brownies from your neighbourhood grocer to-day. And just to be sure you didn't buy the wrong kind the announcer said the name three times and then spelled it. Then he said he was going straight off and eat a big bowl of it while Uncle Boojum,

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

who had just eaten *two* big bowls of it, had another adventure story to tell to all the friends of — (pause) — Barley Brownies!

Then came the chirpy little voice of Skidoo (who was a Brownie) and presently Daisy joined him and they got in an awful fix by landing the magic carpet in a barley field. And the farmer was angry because all his barley was going to the Brownie factory and it had to be perfect in order to go there. But Uncle Boojum, who apparently had fallen off the magic carpet yesterday, crawled out of a haystack and had a funny talk with the farmer and each thought the other was talking about something else. Pretty soon the sheriff came along the road and Uncle Boojum said all the wrong things so that the sheriff thought he was a bank robber and Skidoo and Daisy only made it worse and then they all got arrested and the sheriff took them off to jail and, horror of horrors, they forgot the magic carpet in the barley field and just as they were being taken off to jail the announcer cut in and said all the same things over again about how good Barley Brownies were and she snapped the radio off.

Quarter past five.

If she had a pet rat he would get Barley Brownies. He'd learn to eat them off a spoon very likely. Why didn't Mother come home so she could tell her all about the old man and the pet rat? Of course she could go down and tell Celia again — or James. Was it worth it? No — guess not. She went downstairs anyway, half a mind to go out and talk to James, but instead she went into the living-room and found the evening paper where Celia had left it. For two minutes she was absorbed by the funnies. Nothing else in the paper interested her and she put it back just as it had been because Daddy *hated* to read a paper that somebody else had torn apart.

Through the living-room windows she caught a flash of a blue coupé coming up the drive. It was Mother. Virginia skipped through the dining-room, pushed through the swinging door,

skipped through the kitchen and waited at the back door. James was being very polite to Mother. He was smiling and nodding and saying he would put the car away. Mother got out and came toward the kitchen door. She was coming in the back way and she saw Virginia standing at the screen door and they both smiled and laughed. Then Mother kissed her and patted her.

'Mother, the funniest thing happened,' said Virginia.

'Look — what I brought for you,' said Mother.

'The favours!'

'Yes, you can eat the candies and keep the basket. You can put it on your dressing table and keep things in it. But don't eat the candies now. You'll spoil your dinner.'

Virginia was fascinated by the basket made of orange and blue paper containing chocolates and assorted nuts.

'Can I have one now? Just one, Mother?'

'No, you must save them. After dinner. I want to talk to Celia now.'

They went into the kitchen and while Mother talked to Celia for a minute Virginia took all the candies and all the nuts out of the paper basket and examined them separately and classified them on the kitchen table.

'What's in the funny round kind,' Virginia asked.

'Peppermint,' said Mother, and went on talking to Celia about salad.

In the basket Virginia found a place card on which was printed 'El Encanto Country Club' and written in ink was 'Mrs. Edward R. Stewart'.

'I'm going to be Mrs. Edward R. Stewart,' said Virginia. 'Look, Celia, this is my card. Look, Mother. Can this be a visiting card?'

'Yes,' said Mother, 'you can put it in your pocket book. Now don't get chocolate all over your fingers.'

There were six different kinds of candy and four different kinds

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

of nuts. And the chocolate did come off on your fingers, all right, just as Mother had warned. But you could lick your fingers and that was all right because it wasn't the same as eating a piece. After dinner . . .

Mother was leaving the kitchen. Virginia scooped all the candies and nuts into the basket (one chocolate fell on the floor but that didn't matter — she rescued it and plunked it in with the others — Celia always kept the floor clean) and ran out after Mother.

'In the street car the funniest thing happened!' called Virginia. 'Guess, Mother. Can you guess what it was?'

But Mother was half way upstairs. Virginia hurried after her.

'Come, darling,' Mother called. 'I just have time to dress before dinner. You can help me. Do you want to do that?'

'Yes — yes,' said Virginia going up the stairs two and three at a time. 'Where are you going to-night?'

'The Newmans,' said Mother.

'You goin' to wear an evening dress?'

'Yes.'

They went into Mother's room.

'Which one?'

'I don't know — the black lace, I think.'

'May I get it out, Mother?'

'Yes — but first turn on the bath and put in a spoonful of bath salt. While Mother's bathing you can get out the black lace.'

For almost an hour they had fun dressing. It was a procedure that fascinated Virginia. Many times she had helped Mother dress. There was nothing especially new about it. She could have told anybody exactly how to dress — what you did first, what you wore for a foun-da-tion, depending upon the kind of dress selected. And all about creams and powders and rouge and eyebrow pencils and hair. But new or old, there was always a sense of mystery about it. It portended great things. It was

open sesame to a world Virginia had never known, a ritual inchoate to pomp and circumstance. It was the bated fifteen minutes before the curtain rose on a performance which was so extremely important that even the weight of an eyebrow pencil could make or break it. Sometimes Mother asked advice — this bracelet or that one? — ear-rings? — this ring with these beads or two rings and no beads? — should the perfume be Cassandra or Christmas Night, or one of the odd ones like *My Sin* or *Numero Cinq*? Virginia made her decisions carefully, and sometimes Mother agreed with her and sometimes she didn't. To-night the perfume was *Numero Cinq* (she called it 'sink' because it was spelled that way but Mother always pronounced it 'sank'). But whatever Mother wore she was always beautiful, lovely — oh, simply perfect, always. Nobody could be as beautiful as Mother just before she went out with Daddy in the evening, even if she was as old as thirty-seven. Black lace, *Numero Cinq*, green jade . . .

'Ex-cep-tion-al,' said Virginia.

'Why, darling! Do you think so? Aren't you nice to Mother!'

The concentration and the zest in this interlude temporarily eclipsed the interest in the unusual incident which had taken place in the street car. Old man and pet rat were set aside. They were back in that place-where-you-are-alone.

Daddy came home at six-thirty. Mother was almost dressed and Virginia went downstairs to kiss Daddy and talk to him. She gave him a peck on the cheek and he said, 'Been good to-day?' and she said 'Yes'. He was reading the evening paper and he threw out occasional sentences without looking up from the pages, sentences which she had heard before and which she could answer without thinking.

How was school?

'All right.'

Did she play after school?

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

'Some.'

Did she have home-work to do?

'Not to-night.'

Did she still like her teacher?

'Yes — the teacher was all right.'

There was a rattle as Daddy turned the paper inside out. He never cared what a mess he left it in. She sat still and looked at him as he read the market reports. He was big and tall but not fat at all. He used glasses in order to read but he never wore them at any other time. He wore a dark brown suit and heavy tan shoes. The way he sat with one leg crossed over the other you could see the edge of one garter holding a sock up. He had dark blue eyes and people said her eyes were just like his. But her hair was different. His was sandy coloured and thin on the sides while hers was light brown like Mother's. Then hers came down in two braids and his was cut short. Wouldn't he look funny in braids? Now he was saying, 'What did you do after school to-day?' and she replied, 'Came home'.

Then she remembered the rat. She caught her breath in order to burst out with this fantastic story and then she paused. Would he like to hear about the old man and the rat? No. He wanted to read his paper. He always did the same thing when he came home. You were supposed to answer his questions but if you tried to tell something interesting or asked questions yourself he always said kindly but without even listening, 'Daddy's reading now'.

Mother had been too busy to hear it and Daddy wouldn't want to hear it at this time. She'd save the rat story and tell it at the table. She put her hand inside her dress. Right in there it lived. Just think of that.

'Ratonia, one centime,' she said aloud.

'What did you say?' asked Daddy, without looking up.

'I was thinking of something,' Virginia said.

'Speaking of centimes reminds me,' said Daddy, actually putting down the paper for a moment and coming to life. 'I have a stamp for you.' He fingered in a waistcoat pocket and brought out the stamp. 'See if you can tell what country that is.'

'Indo-Chine,' she read.

'That's right. French Indo-China.'

'Where'd you get it, Daddy?'

'A letter came into the bank to-day. One of our depositors who is making a trip around the world. Daddy's reading now.'

That meant she could go. She took the stamp and went upstairs — two steps at a time — to her own room. She left the stamp on her album and skipped to Mother's room. Mother was seated at her dressing table. With a powder puff she was adding the final touches. As soon as Virginia was in her teens Mother was going to give her a compact. But that was a long way ahead — more than two whole years. It seemed a long time to wait when she knew just how to use a compact now. But then none of the girls she knew had compacts or lipsticks, so maybe it was all right. Now that Mother had finished dressing it might be time to tell her about the rat. She considered it and she watched Mother. No — Mother wouldn't want to hear about the rat now. Mother was still thinking about herself. But Mother would let her put the powders and creams and brushes and perfumes away in their proper places. She could do that without even asking. It amounted to a game and it was barely finished when Celia rang the chimes for dinner.

'There, darling,' said Mother. 'We just got through in time. Let's go down to dinner, sweet.'

They went downstairs together and Mother wouldn't let Daddy kiss her because she didn't want to be mussed up and Daddy didn't seem to mind at all. They went in to dinner and Celia served the soup. Mother and Daddy talked at dinner but Virginia didn't pay much attention. She concentrated on the

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

soup and had almost finished it when Mother told her not to eat so fast. But there was only one spoonful of soup left so she swallowed that and then sat quietly while Mother and Daddy finished theirs, and for the first time during the dinner she listened to their conversation. Daddy had just asked, 'Are we dressing?'

'Now, you know Fred Mason will.'

'Yes, I suppose he will.'

'Helen Newman said all the men were dressing.'

'Just because Fred Mason wears a black tie, I suppose I have to.'

'After all, it's not so very much trouble, dear.'

'I dress,' said Daddy, as Celia removed the soup plates, 'it's in the stars — I dress.'

'Well, really, dear —' said Mother.

Celia served the artichokes. Virginia loved them, especially when the sauce was Hollandaise and to-night it was.

'Yum, yum,' she said, but Mother and Daddy made no comment. There was a pause while Celia passed the roast and after that the vegetables. Now was the time to tell them. Neither of them was talking. There was a silence that was made for the telling of the incident in the street car. Virginia looked at Mother and at Daddy. Now they would listen and they would be interested. It was on the tip of her tongue. The whole incident was reviewed in her mind in a flash. Every detail from the time the old man got on the car until Cherries and Groceries screamed and the conductor put him off — it was all there as clear as could be. She started to say, 'The funniest thing happened —' but she stopped, forming the words only in her mind. Mother sensed her reaction and looked at her, and seemed to think she was choking.

'Take a drink of water, dear,' Mother said.

'Had a letter from Spencer to-day,' said Daddy. 'From Saigon.'

'He's having quite a trip, isn't he,' Mother said.

'M'mm,' Daddy said.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Eat your artichoke, dear,' Mother said, and Virginia pulled off the first leaf and dipped the meaty end of it in the Hollandaise. The opportunity was gone. There was no way to recapture it. 'I wonder if rats like artichokes,' she said as the story receded into limbo, but neither Mother nor Daddy seemed to think the query demanded an answer.

'His wife despises travelling,' Mother said.

'Hope she suffers,' Daddy said, cheerfully.

'Edward!' Mother laughed.

But Virginia was eating the artichoke and wasn't listening. She ate most of her meat and all of the peas and potatoes before she heard Mother and Daddy talking about something that caught her attention.

'What's Virginia doing to-night?' Daddy asked.

'Celia's in,' said Mother.

'Want to go to the movies, dear?' Daddy asked.

'Yes!' said Virginia.

'No,' said Mother, 'not to-night, dear.' And to Daddy she added, 'It's a gangster picture, I don't think she needs to see that.'

'At the Neighbourhood?' Daddy asked.

'Yes,' Mother said.

'Maybe I'd like it,' Virginia said.

'I don't think so, dear,' Mother said. 'Celia can take you to-morrow night when they're showing something else.'

'Okay,' Virginia said.

'And what did you promise Mother about that word?'

'I said I wouldn't say okay — I forgot.'

'That's better,' said Mother.

'That's the girl,' said Daddy.

'Why do they call them artichokes?' asked Virginia. 'Did anybody ever choke on one?'

'You can't choke on an artichoke,' said Daddy, 'unless your name is Arty.'

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

Virginia went into peals of mirth over this. 'Mr. Arty Choke, she said and she laughed again. She repeated it and clung to it, attempting to squeeze all the humour out of it long after Mother and Daddy had forgotten it and were talking about something else.

When dessert was served there was a silence again and once more an opportunity to tell the story of the old man and the rat. But this time there was no temptation to tell it. She really didn't want to tell it. Mother and Daddy were never going to hear of the incident in the street car. That story, once so close to them, was now as remote as the mountains on the moon. Without any deliberate ratiocination Virginia had changed her mind. The story was locked in a vice. No power could ever extract it, no matter how deep and long the present silence might be. The whole thing had taken root in that place-where-you-are-alone. It *couldn't* be told. It was a secret that she had experienced and appreciated. It was all hers. She drank her milk and put her hand inside the bosom of her dress and thought about the rat. Mother and Daddy had no idea of what she was thinking this minute. Even if they tried they couldn't have guessed. There was something downright delicious about it. Thrilling!

'M'mm,' she mumbled, but nobody paid any attention.

As soon as dinner was over Daddy went upstairs to dress. Mother said they must leave the house by eight, and James had the Cadillac at the front door and was waiting in it. That left a scant twenty-five minutes for Virginia to be with Mother, so they went upstairs together to Virginia's room to talk and play. There was all the opportunity in the world to explain about the old man and the rat while Virginia and Mother played three games of parcheesi.

Virginia won the first game ('I could tell but I'm not going to') and Mother barely won the second game even though one of her men was 'sent home' twice ('I don't want to tell because

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

it's a secret') and Virginia won the third game which proved to be almost even ('Nobody knows it but me in that-place-where-I'm-alone') and then Daddy came in dressed in his tuxedo and asked Mother to see if his tie was tied right. Mother fixed it and then they were ready to go.

'Almost eight,' Daddy said, and Mother went to her room to get her coat.

'We haven't time to play a game now,' Daddy said, 'or I'd beat you.'

Celia came into Virginia's room and Daddy said, 'You and Celia can play a game'.

'I beat Celia every time,' Virginia said.

'Ain't it the truth,' Celia said.

Mother came back with her fur coat and Daddy held it while she put it on. Then Mother kissed her and Daddy kissed her and Mother told Celia not to forget that nine o'clock was bedtime. They went downstairs and the front door slammed and the Cadillac purred for a second or two and then the purr faded out as James drove the car down the drive.

'What do you want to play, Celia?'

'Ain't you got no home work to do?' asked Celia, relaxing in the rocking chair.

'Not to-night. Let's work the jig-saw puzzle,' said Virginia, dumping the pieces from their box to the table, but almost immediately she straightened up and shouted, 'My candies!' Before Celia could gather the significance Virginia ran to Mother's room where she had left the paper basket Mother had brought her from El Encanto Country Club. She was back in a moment, her cheeks stuffed with chocolates. She had to swallow a few times before she could make Celia understand that she might have a piece, too. But Celia wouldn't take any and all she said by way of thanks was 'Don't you go eatin' all of them or Mrs. Stewart'll be blamin' me'.

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

'Good — good —' mumbled Virginia, rubbing most of her abdomen which she believed was the location of her stomach.

The jig-saw puzzle occupied almost half an hour. Virginia assembled a number of the pieces, punctuating each successful union with a chocolate, and Celia managed to put together two or three pieces. The thing seemed to be a mill with a waterwheel. It wasn't especially interesting after you worked it out, and there were quite a lot of pieces that just didn't seem to belong anywhere.

'Let's stop it,' said Virginia. 'I don't like it very much.'

Celia was more than willing to stop. Virginia looked at Celia's bland brown face and she wondered if Celia remembered. Probably she didn't because Mother said Celia seldom remembered anything unless you told her forty times. And it had been only once that she had told Celia about the rat. And even that hadn't been telling; she had only asked Celia to guess what she had inside her dress.

'You don't remember much, do you?' asked Virginia.

'Almost time for you to go to bed,' said Celia. 'I remember that.'

There followed the usual discussion, persuasion, admonishment and argument which had become routine every time Mother and Daddy were out and it was Celia's duty to see Virginia into bed. To go to bed simply and matter-of-factly when requested to do so by Celia was something that one just didn't do. Even though she knew that she was going to bed, and hardly thought of the familiar evasions and delays even while speaking them, they were an incumbent gesture and had to be done. But it was a rote performance, for Virginia while saying, 'But that clock's fast, Celia', was thinking, 'She doesn't remember anything about the rat.'

'Ain't fast,' said Celia. 'You get started smack off.'

'But I have to brush my teeth first (she doesn't know I said I had a rat inside my dress).'

'Go brush 'em.'

'We have to put the puzzle back in the box first (she wouldn't remember it unless I said it forty times).'

'I'll put this here puzzle away while you go to the bathroom.'

'I don't know where my nightgown is (she's forgotten it and so has Adachi by this time).'

'Here it is. Now get your clothes off.'

'I'm not a bit sleepy (Ratonia!).'

'You be asleep in five minutes.'

'Oh — all *right!*'

She went through the preparations for bed, really anxious to be rid of Celia but unable to make too great a change in the going-to-bed discussion. If it had been Mother she would have gone to bed as a matter of course and there would have been nothing to discuss about it. But with Celia this kind of thing had to be done. By five minutes past nine she was ready.

'Good night and pleasant dreams,' said Celia. She always said that.

'Good night, Celia (just wait'll you get downstairs).'

Celia snapped off the light and left the room. Virginia could hear her moving down the steps. A dull light from the upstairs hall had gradually made itself known to her eyes. The only sound was the rapid tick of the clock beside her bed. She relaxed in the cool sheets. After a minute or two Celia would be safely in her room off the kitchen and upstairs anything could happen. She could turn on the light and read, or play the radio softly. But for the time being, at least, she did neither of those things. She lay quietly in bed and reviewed the incident in the street car. It began all over again. The only difference was that she was all the people — not only herself but the old man and the conductor and Cherries and Groceries and even the rat. She had

THE INCIDENT IN THE STREET CAR

small black eyes and stiff side whiskers and she was peering out between the sheets. Outside all was darkness and you could feel the space moving past you. You were rushing upward — or was it downward? — because this was the place where you were You and nobody could touch it. Downward now, while a street car went rattlety-rattle clink-clink. A rat was pulling the street car, a rat as big as a horse. You weren't in the street car and you weren't out of it either, but everything was everywhere and when you and the street car hit the arroyo bottom you had a nickel in your hand. You weren't frightened because the old man loved the rat (it had become little again) and you fed the rat the nickel. It sat on its hind legs and ate it with its paws and the nickel tasted like peppermint. You and the old man and the rat were skipping along under the pepper trees and Fred Mason was dressing. He put on a suit and then another suit on top of it and then another suit on top of that because he always dressed. Way in the distance you could see he was still dressing. Mr. Arty Choke came along singing 'Hollandaise', his little fat body tottering on match-stick legs. 'It's Indo-China', he said — 'Indo-China'. And you knew that it was you and the old man and the rat sailing away on the magic carpet to the land of the American Medical Association. Then everything began to come together so that all things happened at once, seeing the sharp little rat face with the black eyes and side whiskers, hearing the rattlety-rattle clink-clink, tasting the chocolate peppermint, touching the soft, smooth, sleek, rat fur, smelling the Numero Cinq — all of it together until in the darkness the soft fur was Mother's fur coat and the Numero Cinq came from Mother as she bent over you and you explained to Mother what you had been wanting to tell her all day — that you fell down the rat hole to the arroyo bottom and it was an adventure that had never happened before. Mother patted you and kissed you good night, and a vague form that was Daddy stood in the doorway.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'She asleep?' Daddy asked.

'She's all right,' Mother said. 'She was dreaming of *Alice in Wonderland*.'

And just as you were going to sleep you knew that it wasn't *Alice in Wonderland* but was something much better because it really happened and to-morrow — and to-morrow . . .

CHAPTER II

ARROYO

I

LAND wasn't worth much in the arroyo bottom. There was quite a lot of it, too, because in some places the arroyo was almost a quarter of a mile wide and ran in a generally southern direction from the big mountains to the north on down past the Rose Bowl and under the curving Colorado Street bridge and on, until it lost itself twisting down into the north-eastern section of Los Angeles where, somewhere, it joined the Los Angeles river bottom and wasn't the arroyo any more.

Ben had been tramping toward the City of Our Lady the Queen of the Angels and one day the Foothill Boulevard became the business section of Pasadena and he continued on Colorado Street until he found himself on the paraboloidal Colorado Street bridge. He walked to the middle of the bridge and stopped. The constant hum and whiz of eastbound and westbound automobiles did not annoy him. He turned his back on them and looked to the north toward the San Gabriels a few miles away, from the canyons of which range the arroyo began. Then he looked below. There were a few houses in the bottom, but not many. Some trees and some gardens. And grass, too. It was pleasant down there.

On the bluffs that formed the east and the west borders of the arroyo were homes, typically California homes, mostly white stucco with red tile roofs, some of them partially hidden in eucalyptus trees, pepper trees, jacaranda and acacia trees — homes in which Ben decided rich people lived. Well, pretty rich. Rich enough, anyway.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

He had two dollars and fifteen cents in his trouser pocket. You could be rich on that if you knew how. Not very rich, but rich enough anyway.

Back the way he had come lay Pasadena. Onward the road would take him into Los Angeles. But below were gardens and grass. September in Southern California isn't usually too cool. You couldn't freeze. But even if it should be cool it would probably be warm down there. It would be nice to stay down there somewhere. The sun was over in the west. What was the use in trudging on into noisy Los Angeles? When you're sixty-two years old you can't hoof it as briskly as some of these younger fellows. That arroyo looked pretty nice. He'd be sure to find some spot to crawl into. He'd go down and see anyway.

He put his right hand inside his shirt and felt the sleek warm body of the tame rat. It wriggled against his stomach, resting in the balloon of his shirt over his belt and trouser top. He could feel its bristling whiskers and occasionally its sharp nails dug into his sides as it braced itself within the shirt.

'That might be a good place down there,' he said aloud, but the roar of the passing traffic over the Colorado Street bridge kept him from hearing his own words. 'We'll go down and see,' he declared. 'That's what we'll do — go see for ourselves.' He walked on across the bridge to its western end where he found a road that curved around and down toward the arroyo bottom and came out on the floor of the arroyo almost under the spans of the bridge. Six stories above him the abutments merged into the elevated highway that crossed the arroyo. You could still detect the roar of the traffic but it seemed remote. This was a little place in the middle of the world and yet quite out of it. You were far away and yet in a few steps you could walk up and be right back in it again. There was something secure about it. Pleasant.

The foliage was thick down here too. Almost lush. Grass,

bushes, trees, and just a little beyond a few small houses and gardens.

'Isn't it nice down here?' Ben asked. He put his hand into his shirt to see if there might be any kind of answer. He fancied the whiskers twitched — but then he told himself he was making it up. The rat didn't really understand anything. People went crazy sometimes when they began to think their animals talked to them. He wasn't crazy. Oh, of course, it understood some things. You could easily see that. But not words. He knew it didn't understand words. He would be foolish to pretend that it did.

'Let's walk up this way,' he said aloud. And so they strolled northward, moving into a more oblate part of the arroyo bottom and passing the Rose Bowl which mystified Ben as it was obviously not a municipal building or a reservoir. Then he realized it was a stadium.

'They play games there,' he explained. 'Football and such. Don't you know what a football is?'

Ahead the arroyo took on something of its former aspect. Soon there was a section which was chaparral — thick bushes about as high as a man's head or a little higher, scrub oak, weeds, even a little prickly pear cactus.

This uncleared section was over close to the east bluff so that some of the houses on the bluff afforded a view below to the chaparral-covered bottom as well as a view to the west where the other bluff was almost a quarter of a mile away.

'We like this place, don't we?' Ben asked his shirt front. And after a moment he assured himself with 'Yes indeedy'. He stopped and looked around. 'Mary Sunshine woulda liked it, too. Course you never knowed her. You wasn't even born.'

Shadows were crawling across the floor of the arroyo as the sun hit the rim of the western bluff and began to sink behind a hilly residential district with a sign set against the hills which spelled out in large letters 'Flintridge'.

As he stood he could hear voices, and then a tap and following the tap a clink. Then the voices again. Above the screen of chaparral, a few yards farther on, a red flag was raised. There was a white '6' on the flag and whoever raised it had stuck the pole bearing it into the ground, for now the flag flapped a time or two in the waning sunlight and the unseen voices faded away.

'What was all that?' Ben asked. He patted the outside of his bulging shirt and moved into the chaparral, following a plain trail, still northward. A few paces more and the chaparral gave way to the landscaped ground on the left. There was a patch of close-cropped bright green grass. On three sides of the green were bunkers and sand traps, and on the fourth was the chaparral through which Ben peered.

'Golf,' said Ben. 'That's what.'

There came a whirr and a whack from the seventh tee not far off. This was followed by another whirr and a whack, and then two men came into view, walking away from Ben toward the club house across the arroyo.

'They think that's fun,' Ben explained to his shirt front. He watched them walk until one of them stopped and took his stance. After a few seconds he raised a club and struck the unseen ball. The men were too far away now for any audible whirr and whack. Presently the man's companion went through the same procedure, and then they walked on and were almost indistinguishable. 'And maybe it is,' said Ben. 'You've got to get used to it, that's all. Just get used to it and it's fun.'

The trail through the chaparral skirted the sixth green and then veered north-east. Ben followed it, content to walk a little farther since this exploration had proven interesting. Here the undergrowth was thicker than before. The trail followed a small sandy gully and a few seconds later he came upon a one-room shack. At the same instant he was conscious of movement. Somebody or something had scooted into the shack. Somebody

or something had heard him coming along the trail and brushing by the bushes the second before he had appeared. In the dim interior of the shack somebody or something was peering out at him, moving slightly but making no sound.

The shack was made of odds and ends of lumber and it leaned precariously to one side. In one wall there was an opening which served as a casement. A cracked piece of glass only half the size of the opening, partially formed a window. There was some kind of stove inside for a battered stove-pipe pushed through the flat roof. A glimpse in the open doorway showed the shack to be lined with old newspapers, and the vague form within moved farther back as Ben walked to the entrance and looked around with interest and admiration.

Set in the sand on each side of the doorway were two green glass bottles. Bits of broken glass had been arranged beside the bottles. One series of pieces outlined the form of a heart, and another series made an arrow. On the wall of the shack, where a doorbell would have been had there been a doorbell, was the bleached skull of a small animal — a gopher or a squirrel. Over the doorway a hawk's wing had been spread and tacked. From a tiny crater in the sand a parade of ants hurried into the shack and the returning force, carrying some plunder back to the crater, stopped momentarily for antennae contact with the incoming horde.

Ben surveyed the immediate environs with appreciation. Above, on the bluff, were the homes of the well-to-do, and here in the chaparral of the arroyo bottom was the home of a not-so-well-to-do. Something like this, after all, was just about what he had been half hoping to find. He had been looking for a place where he might feel entirely at ease.

'Sure looks like the house of an artist,' said Ben. 'Don't it?' He stepped back in order to see it altogether as an entity, and something moved within the shack and a figure came to the doorway.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

At first it wasn't a man, but a second glance proved that it was. He wasn't quite five feet tall and wore dirty dungerees and a ragged coat. He held his hands before his breast, clenching and unclenching his stubby fingers, and stared querulously at Ben.

'Build it yourself?' asked Ben.

The tenant opened his mouth to speak, but the mental answer was ahead of articulation and for a second his open mouth showed that all his front teeth were missing. Then the words came and he said in a high-pitched voice, 'Me? Yes'. He stood in the doorway, ill at ease, picking at a wart on the back of a hand, and watching Ben with timid interest.

'Right nice,' said Ben critically. 'Yes indeedy.'

'Travelin'?' asked the tenant with a squcak.

'Some,' said Ben.

'I used to. Now I ain't.'

'Others live around here?' asked Ben.

'Gosh, yes,' the tenant said. 'Heavy's here. Know Heavy?'

'No,' said Ben.

'Tex?'

'Lots of boys get named Tex,' said Ben. 'I've knowed three or four.'

'This Tex is a young 'un.'

'Maybe I don't know him,' said Ben. 'How long you had this house?'

'Long time.'

'Year?'

'No. Gosh, I don't know. Maybe.'

'Don't mind if I sit down for a spell, do you?'

'Gosh, no.'

'I got some victuals there,' said Ben, 'and I allowed as how I'd rest here maybe.'

'They come and go,' said the man in the doorway.

'Yeah,' said Ben, sitting down on the sand a few feet from his host.

'A fellow named Buck. He came — and then he went.'

'Yeah,' said Ben. He unrolled his sack and spread it on the sand, segregating the contents and examining piece by piece. There was some bread and cheese and an apple. From a pocket Ben brought a jack-knife and began to peel the apple, concentrating on the job in order to keep the peel as thin as possible. His friend watched.

'What do they call you?' Ben asked.

'Me? Gosh.'

'Gosh?'

'Yeah.'

They both concentrated as the apple described a slow revolution in Ben's hand and a shred of peel hung into space.

'I'm Ben.'

Gosh said nothing, but he continued to watch the peel. With the apple half pared Ben held it up and examined it carefully. Gosh left the doorway and squatted down on the sand near Ben. 'Looks like a right pretty piece of fruit,' he piped.

Ben held it at arm's length and looked at it critically, his head on one side. Either because he was far-sighted or in order to benefit by the last rays of the fading twilight, he held it high in the direction of Gosh.

Gosh swallowed.

'Sweet and juicy,' said Ben.

'I got some coffee,' said Gosh.

'Yeah,' said Ben. 'I got cheese here — and bread.'

'Coffee for the apple,' said Gosh.

'Well —' Ben hesitated. 'Maybe.'

'I'll get it started,' said Gosh, crawling to his feet. He began to make a fire in a small pit protected by a few bricks.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

It was dark when they ate supper — bread, cheese, coffee, and fruit to finish off.

The rat was an innovation. At first, Gosh was afraid of it. He said that rats bit sometimes but Ben explained that they only bit when they were cornered and frightened. This one was a trained rat. Gosh watched while Ben fed it bread and cheese. He was interested but he wouldn't touch it, and if it moved in his direction he whimpered and crawled away.

They had almost finished eating when they heard somebody approaching along the trail in the dark. Then they heard voices and a moment later two forms came out of the darkness and passed before Gosh's shack. One was large and one was middle-sized. Gosh said, 'That's Heavy and Tex'.

'Hi, Gosh,' called Heavy.

'Heavy scooped a leg of lamb,' said Tex. 'Oh, baby!'

'Who's that?' asked Heavy, seeing the outline of Ben's form.

'Ben,' said Ben.

'He just come,' said Gosh.

'Okay,' said Heavy.

'It was stickin' out of a parked car,' said Tex. 'He did it as easy as nothin'.'

'We're gonna cook it,' said Heavy.

'Keep movin', Heavy,' said Tex.

They passed by, following the trail on north, disappearing at once in the darkness into a section of the chaparral that Ben had not yet visited.

The fire went down and Gosh made no attempt to keep it going. He and Ben sat on the sand before the shack and watched the embers die out. Once in a while the two men spoke, but often a quarter of an hour would go by between sentences.

'Where do you get your water?' asked Ben.

'There's a spigot,' said Gosh.

Ben nodded but in the darkness Gosh couldn't see the acknow-

ledgment and there was silence again. A gentle breeze blowing down from the north carried the odour of cooking meat.

'They'll give us some to-morrow,' said Gosh. 'Maybe.'

'How many boys are here?' asked Ben.

'Just them and us — but they come and go all the time,' said Gosh.

'Yeah,' said Ben.

'But it ain't a jungle,' said Gosh emphatically. 'Heavy says it ain't a jungle. It's different. It's a camp.'

'Sure,' said Ben.

'There ain't many here at onct,' Gosh explained. 'Not like a jungle.'

'Like a camp,' said Ben.

'Yeah,' said Gosh.

After a long silence Gosh yawned and said, 'I'm goin' to sleep.'

'Me, too,' said Ben.

'Inside is best,' said Gosh. 'In the morning it gets wet out here.'

'You got a little box or a paper bag?' asked Ben.

'Why?'

'He likes a little box or a paper bag to sleep in,' said Ben.

'Who?'

'Him,' said Ben.

'Oh,' said Gosh. 'I got a cardboard box.'

'He likes that,' said Ben. 'But he don't like it with a top on.'

Gosh went in the shack and Ben waited in the doorway. In a moment Gosh struck a match and lit a candle. Ben was surprised to see that on a broken table were half a dozen golf balls.

'I find 'em,' said Gosh. 'Sometimes I sell 'em. This do?'

'Yeah — that's a good box,' said Ben.

'That's where I sleep,' said Gosh, indicating a pile of gunny sacks in a corner. 'Aint' much room in here.'

'I'll fix my bed out of a coat,' said Ben. 'Like this.' He folded his coat and laid it on the sandy soil. The shack had no floor.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

Gosh's preparations for the night exceeded simplicity. He lay down on his bed of gunny sacks and blew out the candle.

Ben stood for some time in the doorway. The denseness of the chaparral made the night seem darker than it actually was. Overhead the sky was full of stars. Ben could distinguish at last 'that bunch of little ones', by which he meant the Pleiades. The smell of cooking meat no longer hung in the air. Occasionally the sound of distant automobiles could be heard. And by stretching his neck he could see lights in some of the houses above on the bluff. Slowly he drew the rat from within his shirt and put it in the cardboard box. Gosh's rhythmical breathing indicated sleep. Ben was tired too. He lay down on his coat just within the doorway and pulled the loose end of the garment over one shoulder. The cardboard box he put in the crook of one elbow. With his other hand he slowly scratched the rat's back. He'd had worse beds than this. After a few minutes he slept.

II

The sun had not been up long the next day before Ben felt at home in the chaparral. A little exploring, and then he was familiar with it all. There was perhaps the length of three city blocks of scrub oak and underbrush extending from the sixth green of the golf club northward until this forest came to an abrupt end before the concrete wall of the Devil's Gate dam, which rose straight into the air six stories high. Beyond the concrete was a lake of water and there was a spill-way which had been known to overflow in the spring of the year when the dam was filled by torrents from the mountains. But none of the men of the arroyo bottom could recall a time when it had actually spilled over. None of them had been there that long. Gosh didn't even know that it was a dam. He thought it was just

another bridge like the Colorado Street bridge to the south — only this was a bridge that had solid underpinning instead of arched abutments. He even argued that it was a bridge because high above on its flat surface automobiles crossed back and forth just as they crossed the Colorado Street bridge. When Ben said he had discovered that it was both a bridge and a dam Gosh was content to let it go at that. After all, it was of no particular interest to anybody. It just *was*. That's all.

The chap named Buck who had come and gone, according to Gosh's brief account, interested Ben especially. If Buck had lived for a while in the arroyo he must have had some kind of quarters. And before noon of the first morning in the arroyo, Ben found them. Three walls of a shack with a fourth wall caved in and a roof collapsed, a litter of tin cans, some garbage, and a few rags — that had been Buck's residence. It was only a few yards north from Gosh's house and now it was abandoned and falling to pieces and begging for somebody to fix it up. Accordingly Ben began to fix it. There was no hurry about it. He would do a little work at a time — first the fourth wall had to be made secure, and the roof had to be fastened down. It didn't have to be too well done as Ben wasn't sure just how long he would stay. If he should take a notion to move on it would be foolish to have expended a great deal of energy on this shack. Then there was the problem of getting enough to eat. The arroyo might be a nice place to live in, but so was the desert if you could find some way to eat. Of course there were a lot of rich folks' homes adjacent and you could always go to the back door and say you were hungry. You could always get *something* by that simple direct way. Only it was bad for repeats. And if you tried it at the same house a third time they usually turned you down. Funny about that: three different men could go to the same house on three successive days, and all three would get some kind of handout. But just go there three days in succession yourself and see what

happens. The house would give away the same amount of food, but for some inexplicable reason it never wanted to give it to the same man again. Ben had discussed the fact once with a stranger in Bakesfield and once with a friend in Peoria. Nobody seemed to be able to account for it. Ben finally attributed it to 'human nature' and dismissed it, but it was never a really satisfactory explanation. Funny thing.

How you ate really depended upon the type of community in which you found yourself. You wouldn't make the same kind of effort here that you would if you were staying in the neighbourhood of the Union Rescue Mission on Main Street in Los Angeles. In a place like this you could putter and tinker. When you knocked at a back door and they asked you what you wanted you explained that you could cut grass, or wipe off a car, or fix screens, or wash windows, and best of all, you could tinker. You could fix anything that was broken — locks, tools, faucets, almost anything. That was the system to use in a neighbourhood like this. The chances looked pretty good.

And the prospect proved itself. The second day after Ben came to the arroyo he asked for work at a house on the bluff about two blocks to the south and was given the job of repairing a leaky garden hose. The rotten part had to be cut out and the joints spliced with a makeshift turnbuckle and the job took three hours and earned seventy-five cents. It was pleasant work, too. If that sort of thing kept on he might stay here for two or three months, or longer. He never could tell for sure when it would be nice to move on. After all, it's the weather that makes you make up your mind. You don't have to lay awake nights making any plans. You'll know when you feel like moving.

And there were pretty nice men here, too. That Gosh, he wasn't very bright, but he was all right. Sold used golf balls sometimes. Not very good business though. Young Tex was just a youngster — a good-natured squirt who never worried

much and grinned a lot and spit blood. Funny thing. Whenever he got excited, or sometimes for no reason at all, there was a place in his mouth that would bleed and he'd go spitting it out. Never bothered him any. You got so you didn't notice it. And it always stopped after a little while. Tex said it was because he was tough. He came from one of the border towns down along the Rio Grande, but he'd been around a lot and he told a lot of tales. Lies, maybe. Can't tell. A kid is like that and he'll make up a tale out of nothing just to show off and brag a little, kid-like. Like the time he told of beating up three Mexicans in Via Acuna. Got beat up himself, like as not, and told it t'other way around. Nice kid, though. Had freckles. Handy around a grocery store, too. Whenever he came back to the arroyo with a half pound of butter in his pants or some canned milk in his crotch he'd hand it out and say, 'I sure take things easy'. Then he'd laugh and spit blood. Them red-heads, they're all kinda like that. Can't do nothin' with 'em.

Heavy was a good fellow, too. He was the boss. It wasn't his arroyo — it wasn't that — but he kinda oversaw it. And he was right; this was no common jungle. It was an accommodation camp. You might almost say it was a place for gentlemen transients, not just for every old Tom, Dick and Harry. It was Heavy who jawed Gosh for lettin' the water run all night out of the spigot on the golf course. 'Run too much water and they'll put a lock on it.' Heavy was right. Gosh never said nothin' back; he just took it settin' down. 'Now you guys be careful,' Heavy said to Ben and Gosh and young Tex. 'This here's too soft to spoil. Get careless and you'll get run out.' And that was right. Somebody had to look out for things so Heavy did it. 'This ain't no common jungle, so don't kill it.' Then he shut up and went away. But it showed he was the boss, all right. Good boss, too. Gosh turned the spigot off good and tight after that.

By the time a week had gone by Ben's house was in respectable

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

shape. It was considered as 'Ben's place' now, and everybody forgot that it used to be 'Buck's place'. Nobody seemed to remember Buck any more.

Not only had Ben made the roof secure and propped the fourth wall up, but he cleared away the weeds and battered cans and rotting garbage and put two rows of stones from the door of the shack to the sandy bottom of the gully. Nobody made any comment about it, but Ben thought it looked better than it had before. 'Sets it off,' he thought, but he said nothing about it.

The city dump was a long way off. It was too long a walk to take every day, but two or three times a week Ben made expeditions over that way, and slowly he began to accumulate property.

It was a good dump, indeed, with many oddments you wouldn't find in just any dump. You can tell almost everything about a town by its dump if you've got a practised eye. For instance, there wasn't much manufacturing done here — very little discarded baling wire, hardly any old iron, no copper wire at all, only a few packing cases, hardly any barrel staves, and you had to scratch to find nails. But on the other hand there were busted bedsteads, worthless radios (but good parts in 'em sometimes), many shoes, newspapers, magazines, tin cans, a hat, a cocktail shaker that leaked, children's toys, a mattress with most of the stuffing gone, an automobile club emblem, a fly swatter, pots and pans, tar paper, bottles, jars and buckets, two dog collars — innumerable objects worth repossessing if you had any ideas of your own plus a knack at being handy with things. And on one of his return trips Ben dragged after him a battered baby carriage.

'What's eatin' you?' asked Heavy.

'Gonna have a baby?' asked Tex.

Ben explained that if he took it all apart it would be valuable. There were rubber tyred wheels, and axles, a spring, a handle, a

variety of little parts that might be fixed and straightened and used for a number of things.

'You can have 'em,' said Tex in derision, and he was mildly surprised to see that Ben really wanted them. On another trip Ben found a discarded bird cage — a fairly good-sized cage, too — and it was quite a prize. For it could be repaired and would make a splendid house for the pet rat. Not only was it practical for this purpose but Ben was able to make from his growing supply of odds and ends, plus two wheels from the baby carriage, a small wire treadmill which he fastened inside the cage. It afforded the rat great sport to run like fury on the circular mill.

'He's just like us,' said Tex as he watched the rat run within the whirling mill.

'How?' asked Heavy, watching the performance.

'He can go like hell but he ain't gettin' no place.'

'He gets exercise,' explained Ben, 'and he likes it.'

'He's crazy,' concluded Tex, spitting a gob of blood into the cage, 'but I ain't got no right to call names.'

'It's bettern' workin',' said Heavy. 'Let's take a walk into town.'

'Okay,' said Tex.

Previous to the acquisition of the bird cage Ben had had to take the rat with him everywhere he went. It might have been frightened and run away if it had been left alone in the arroyo bottom. But now it could remain safely at home, and only occasionally did he take it along on some of his daily prowls as he became familiar with the city of Pasadena.

People had been coming to Pasadena for the mild California winter for years. Now he was one of them. This place bid fair to rival any spot he had ever picked before. Except perhaps for that time years ago when he had met Mary Sunshine. A pity she wasn't here now. Why, she'd just fit into this place like it was made for her — her and all her little peculiarities. Noble woman!

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

He couldn't even remember the name of the town now after all the years, but it was in Pennsylvania somewhere, of that he was positive. And there was that large hospital-like building over on the hill and the town dump down in the valley and the town itself just over yonder. He'd found a fortune in copper wire in that town's dump — almost seven dollar's worth. That had been the first sign that something good was bound to happen. Good things always started slowly and then came with a rush. Then a few days later Mary Sunshine had come into his life. A splendid summer that had been. If Mary Sunshine was still alive (and she was certainly a healthy woman in her day) and if he knew what her post office name was, he would send her a little postal card telling her how he was fixed. It would be a picture-card of a small white stucco house with roses all around it. 'Dear Mary Sunshine. Got me a small house out here in Pasadena surrounded by millionaires and other winter tourists. Rent is dirt cheap and has private golf course. May stay for the season. If your wings has growed big, fly out and meet me. Respec.'

Such a postal was not untruthful at all. And who could tell — a woman of Mary Sunshine's ability and genius might have sprouted wings just as she said she would. Stranger things than that have happened. And if everybody laughed when he told about Mary Sunshine, that was only their ignorance. Most people weren't fit to go takin' her name in vain. Most people didn't deserve to hear about her. He'd kept her to himself for a long time now. But wouldn't she be happy out here though? Her and her peculiarities?

III

The one drawback to living in the exclusive residential district between Arroyo Drive and Flintridge was the fact that it was

such a long way from Ben's place of business. It was over two miles to the city dump and that meant more than a four mile walk. To do that in the hot sun and carry, say an awkward object such as a mattress with half of the stuffing missing and the other half falling out, was a tedious job. On one occasion when Ben had some small change — payment for repairing a meat grinder at a house on Palm Drive the day before — he permitted himself the luxury of a street car ride because the street car went within a block of the arroyo edge and it was but a short walk from the end of the line to the trail that led down the bluff and came out next to Gosh's house at the bottom. A week later he allowed himself the indulgence of paid transportation again. This time he had taken the rat with him and he had hesitated to board the street car because such an unusual event might scare the rat. He was within a few blocks of the end of the line when the car came along and on an impulse he decided to try it. It wasn't worth a nickel for such a short ride, but it would give him a notion as to the rat's reactions and after a few blocks they would be off again. As soon as he was on the car the rattle and clink disturbed the rat and Ben had to put his right hand inside his shirt in order to smooth the rat's back and reassure it that all was well. He sat down in the fore part of the car and it was a precarious moment. Then the moment became critical because the conductor came along with the fare collector and Ben's coins were in his right-hand trouser pocket. There was no way to get the coins out of the right-hand trouser pocket because his right hand was busy inside his shirt.

He looked up helplessly and the conductor was frowning and saying, 'If you can't pay you have to get off'. That was one way out of the dilemma he had blundered himself into and he would have gotten up and walked to the front exit, but just at that moment a little girl, who had been sitting a little farther back in the car, had come forward without Ben or the conductor noticing

and she placed a nickel in the fare collector and went to her seat. That satisfied the conductor and the crisis was over.

Ben hadn't noticed the child before. She was a nice-looking little girl who wore a pink dress and had her hair in two braids. After a moment she turned and looked toward him and he smiled. He wanted her to enjoy the secret now that she was a partner in its execution, and he opened his shirt front slightly, and the rat, fairly calm now but curious as always, peered out. She would doubtless be surprised and entranced by the sharp little nose and the black eyes and the bristling side whiskers all peering out from a man's shirt front. And indeed she was, for Ben could see her face express surprise, amazement, delight, and . . . Screams! Several sharp screams of terror came from two lady passengers sitting across the aisle.

After that things happened so fast that Ben scarcely knew the order of events. The car was stopped in the middle of the block and the conductor was saying something, but in the confusion Ben didn't hear the words and a second later he was thrust off the front platform and sent staggering on the street, almost losing his balance, and when he righted himself he walked to the kerb while the car gave two clangs and went on toward Palm Drive. For a moment all of its passengers were staring out at him and then the car rolled on and he sat down on the kerb for a minute just to be sure that the rat was all right and that no harm had been done by the episode.

'We got thrown off,' he said. 'Now what do you think of that — thrown off. I declare, something happens every day. Now we'll have to walk.' He rose and started toward home. 'But, 't'ain't far, so we don't care. 'T'aint't far at all. We got thrown off, we did.'

It was a matter of no consequence and he closed his mind to it as he trudged along, turning on to Arroyo Drive and walking north for a block. He followed his usual route, across the lot to

ARROYO

the rear of a garage belonging to a two-story white house where there was a trail that led to the arroyo bottom. He dropped below and in a few minutes he was down in the chaparral, past Gosh's shack, and home again at his own place. By that time he had forgotten all about the incident in the street car. And he was unaware that he had been observed as he came up Arroyo Drive and watched from behind a hedge as he crossed the vacant lot, and spied upon from above as he descended the trail until he disappeared into the chaparral. Nor had he any idea that during the next few days his movements coming and going up and down the trail and across the lot and on the adjacent streets were liable to detailed surveillance between the hours of four and six in the afternoon and at most any hour on Saturdays. He would have said that nobody paid any attention to him or displayed the slightest interest in what he did, and would have been greatly mistaken. Sometimes he was watched from an upstairs window, sometimes from behind a hedge; several times he was followed on the street; once he was stared at from a passing Cadillac which later turned into the private drive of the white house with the hedge around it. And of all this he remained ignorant.

A week after the incident in the street car he was homeward bound on Palm Drive when a figure came out from behind a palm tree only a few steps ahead and as he came nearer the figure said, 'How do you do?'

Ben said, 'Why, hello,' and walked on, passing the donor of this ostentatious greeting with no further ado. He noted that she was a little girl wearing a blue dress and her hair in two braids and carrying some books — school books maybe — in her hands. After a few steps the little girl in blue recalled the little girl in pink of a week ago who had tried to be helpful on the street car, and of course both little girls were one and the same little girl and he hadn't recognized her even though she had recognized

him. He stopped and looked back. She was still standing beside the palm tree, and when he turned she said, 'Where is it?'

'Him?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said.

A distance of ten feet separated them. They looked at each other carefully but neither one stepped nearer.

'He's in his house,' said Ben.

'Has he got a *house*?'

'Yes, indeedy.'

'Where is his house?'

'Down there,' said Ben, nodding in the direction of the arroyo.

She looked with interest, and Ben smiled and walked on. Now she was certainly a well brought up little girl and must live somewhere near by and if he ever happened to see her again he would be sure to speak nicely to her because children these days who had good manners should certainly be encouraged. At the end of the block he looked back. She was still standing beside the palm tree.

Once in Trenton a gang of boys had hooted at him on the street; and once in Kansas City some children, both boys and girls, had made fun of him. But this little girl was different and she was truly a fine type of child. If he had thought of it he would have returned her nickel.

On her part, Virginia had reached some conclusions about him. Never had she heard of a man who had a tame rat. Some people had dogs or cats or birds or goldfish, but this old man was the first person she had ever seen who owned a pet rat and who seemed to take it for granted that owning a pet rat was a normal commonplace event. Furthermore, he was a remarkable old man. As the days had passed since the incident in the street car she had learned more about him. That he lived in the arroyo bottom was a certainty. That he was poor was equally certain. That he worked now and then at odd jobs was obvious. That

Mother and Daddy and Celia and Adachi and James knew of his existence was unlikely, even improbable. That he was a nice man was plain to see in his face, and even in the few words he had answered when she waited behind a tree and then popped out and spoke to him.

A few days later they met again. He was alone but Virginia was walking with Celia, and Celia made a difference. Virginia didn't speak and Ben didn't speak, but they looked sharply at each other as they passed and their eyes twinkled and each knew that the other had smiled inwardly. It was none the less a greeting because of an absence of words. But Celia never noticed.

After that, to watch for him and follow him and discover more and more about him became a new game. But it was a game limited entirely by geographical boundaries. Once he went down the trail to the arroyo bottom he entered a world she had never known. And down there was the place he spent most of his time, the place where he lived, a strange, mysterious, fascinating place so near and yet so far. To lean over the garden hedge and peer below was unsatisfactory. All you could see was the dense mass of chaparral, but what went on within the chaparral was something you couldn't guess.

Once she had asked Mother (rather casually so that Mother wouldn't take any especial notice) what was down on the arroyo bottom and Mother had said, 'sand and underbrush'. Later she asked Daddy the same question and he said, 'What?'

'What is on the arroyo bottom?'

'Oh, just earth and dirt and weeds, I suppose,' Daddy said.

Celia, when interrogated, had a more positive and, enigmatically, a more negative answer. 'Nothin',' said Celia.

James avoided the issue by saying, 'Never been down there', and Adachi was the least satisfactory of all. He merely grinned back at you and said, 'No savvy'.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

So there was no gaining information by questions or by observation. The only way to know what was on the arroyo bottom was to go down and take a look for yourself. Once in a while smoke curled up from the chaparral and once or twice other men used the trail besides the old man who owned the pet rat.

When she came to think of it, it was funny that she had never gone down there before. As long as she could remember, the arroyo had always been there just as Palm Drive had always been there and the Colorado Street bridge had always been there. The arroyo had been accepted as a matter of fact, an inevitable thing that you took for granted. But recently the old arroyo had taken on a new interest. If it was such a commonplace phenomenon that it lacked romance it had certainly thrown a cloak of mystery about itself. And that mystery had to be solved.

Each time since the incident in the street car that Virginia had seen Ben there had been no outward sign of the presence of the rat. He did not seem to be obliged to keep his right hand inside his shirt. When he walked on the street he swung both hands — provided he wasn't carrying something — at his sides just as any other person might do. Could it be that he didn't carry the rat in his shirt any more? Or did the rat live down in the arroyo and never come up because of the tragic experience in the street car? The second Saturday after that initial event things came to a crisis. Ten days had gone by in which Ben had been watched and followed and spoken to. On this particular Saturday about noon he had come along Arroyo Drive from the downtown section, crossed the lot, and taken the trail to the bottom. He hadn't come up by one o'clock but a thin wisp of blue smoke had floated up from the chaparral indicating some activity below. What was that expression grown-ups sometimes said? 'Where there's smoke there's fire.' Well, somebody had a fire down

there and there was no doubt about that and little doubt as to who it was.

Celia called her to come in from the garden at one o'clock to have lunch with Mother. While they had vegetable soup together Virginia almost asked if she could go down to the arroyo bottom after lunch, but something stopped her in time. For if she asked that, Mother would want to know *why* she wanted to go to the arroyo bottom, and that would never do because it would be so hard to explain to Mother all the reasons when Mother didn't know any of them or even know about the strange event which had begun the whole thing ten days ago. Instead Virginia said, 'If I play in the garden to-day can I play in the lot, too?'

'Yes,' Mother said. 'Why don't you go see Claire Ensley?'

'Maybe I will.'

'I saw Mrs. Ensley yesterday and she said Claire had missed you recently.'

'Has she?'

'You haven't had a quarrel, have you?'

'Oh, no, Mother.'

'Because Claire is a nice little girl and it's nice for you to be friends.'

'Sure,' said Virginia.

'Sure-ly,' said Mother.

'Surely,' said Virginia.

Celia came in with scrambled eggs and tomatoes and they had the rest of their lunch. And when dessert was over Virginia returned to the garden. Mother would be home all afternoon and Daddy would be home early because to-day was Saturday. But she was free to do anything she pleased. If she went to see Claire Ensley nobody would be concerned. So if she went down to the arroyo bottom would it be any different, really, than going to see Claire Ensley?

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

By leaning over the hedge and peering below she could see that the smoke had stopped rising. Maybe he had come up while she and Mother had been at lunch. If she went down there and looked around she could come right back up again in a few minutes. It was only because she had never gone down there before that it seemed like such an adventure. Why, think of the places that boy scouts went — all over the mountains and the desert — and here she was wondering about walking down a trail that was really part of her own back yard.

She stepped over the hedge, scratching her legs against the trimmed branches. Then she walked along the outside edge on the rim of the arroyo until the garage screened her from the house. A few steps farther and she reached the point where her yard ended and the hedge turned at right angles and ran eastward along the southern edge of the property to Arroyo Drive. Ahead was the vacant lot, and dropping down, switchbacking as it dropped, was the trail that led to the bottom. Nobody was in sight. Below she could see where the trail curved into the chaparral. Beyond that was the mystery. It wouldn't be a mystery much longer. She'd go down there and explore the whole thing. Then she'd come up and tell Mother all about it. Probably Mother had never been down there and she'd be interested in hearing what it was like.

She started down the trail. It was steeper than it looked and you had to watch your step. If you went too fast you'd slip. Down, down, and in a few seconds she'd be all the way down to the chaparral. Step, leap, jump — down, down, down.

CHAPTER III

VERISIMILITUDE

I

VIRGINIA stopped at the place where the trail touched the sandy bottom of the arroyo. It was suddenly very quiet — no breeze, no sound, not even a bird. Behind her the trail corkscrewed up to the arroyo top, but from her present position it was impossible to see any of her house or garden because she was too close to the base of the cliff. Ahead the trail entered the chaparral growth and disappeared in the density of the foliage. Across the arroyo was the landscaped ground of the golf course, and over the top of the chaparral was the little flag marking the proximity of the sixth green.

She wasn't sure that she wanted to go any farther. The place was full of mystery. But when she craned her neck to look up the sky was blue and the sun was shining and she could climb back up the trail in a minute or two any time she wished. So what was there scary about this place? Nothing — it was only that it was strange, that was all. A bird chirped and flew over the chaparral. Then another. Virginia looked around and took a couple of steps toward the chaparral. The trail was plain to see. Trails were meant to be walked on. Why not follow it? After all, she had come this far.

She walked into the mottled chiaroscuro of the sun and shade within the scrub oaks. The trail curved almost at once and unless you knew the lay of the land from having seen it from above, you wouldn't know just where you were. The trail went on and she followed it, instinctively walking on her tiptoes even

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

though the sand would have made no noise had she run in it, and a few steps brought her to the slight clearing, caused by the widening of the gully, where stood the ramshackle home of Gosh. She stood looking at it for a full minute, ready to dash back the way she had come. Again there was no sound. Nobody was home.

She hummed to herself without considering the tune, singing the words under her breath. It was not a jazz tune or a swing number, many of which she had learned from the radio, but was a monotonous and somewhat lugubrious melody which she had often heard Celia sing over and over when she was busy in the kitchen. The spirit of emotional rejoicing implied in the lyrics was belied by the parrot repetition of the simple melody.

Goin' to Jerusalem
Jest like John;
Goin' to Jerusalem
Jest like John;
Goin' to Jerusalem
Jest like John —
Gonna see the Lord to-day.

Virginia sang it, concentrating on her surroundings as she walked, slowly passing the uninviting shack which a quick glance disclosed lined with old newspapers. She looked back, and then ahead. The trail went on into denser chaparral. She followed it. At once the little clearing and the shack were lost to view. She sang 'Goin' to Jerusalem' in rhythm to her stride but she stopped both the stride and the song abruptly when she saw a human figure ahead in the brush.

For an instant she was frightened. Her impulse was to run, but in spite of it she simply stood, wondering if she should do something, anything.

The old man, the very same old man, was peering at her. Her

VERISIMILITUDE

pink dress gave her away. He seemed to know her. 'Hello there,' he said. 'You playin' hide and seek?'

It sounded reassuring, but she was incapable of a reply.

'Or maybe you come to see me?' he asked.

'No,' said Virginia, taking a deep breath. 'Oh, no — I'm just looking around.'

'That's right. Look around and see the world,' he said. 'See the world and learn its ways.'

He moved away from her and she saw that there was another shack near by and that the undergrowth had been cleared away from it. The old man sat down on a rickety chair with a broken back in front of the house. 'You can come a little closer,' he said. 'It's all right here.'

'I know,' said Virginia, but she hadn't the least idea what she meant.

'You live up above?'

'Yes,' she said, moving forward a step in order to see beyond the screen of bushes.

'Now I reckon I owe you five cents.'

'Oh, no,' said Virginia. 'I didn't come for the nickel.'

'You live in the white house with the green hedge around it?'

'Yes, that's where I live.'

'Well, well — think of that. And I live right here in this house.'

'Where's *his* house?'

'Whose house?'

'The *rat's*.'

'Oh — , ' Ben laughed. 'His house is inside of my house.'

'It is?'

'Yes, indeedy.'

There was a moment of silence. Then Virginia said, 'I was sorry when they threw you off the street car'.

'Oh — , ' said Ben deprecatingly, 'warn't nothin'! Nothin' at all.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Where is it now?'

'The street car?'

'No! The rat!'

'Oh — oh — why — he's here.'

'Where?'

'Inside.'

'Your shirt?'

'No — inside the house.'

'Oh — ' Virginia paused. She looked at the old man. He was smiling. He looked nice. There was no reason to be afraid of him. 'Can I see it? I mean, *may* I see it?'

'You go to school, don't you?'

'Yes — what's its name?'

'Oh, he ain't got any regular name.'

'Well, you call him something, don't you?'

'No,' said Ben. 'Hardly ever.'

'No name at all?'

'Just "Rat",' said Ben.

'Rat,' said Virginia. 'Has he got a friend named Mole? I have a book and there's a rat in it and he has a friend named Mole.'

'I expect he might know a mole or two,' said Ben. 'He never said.'

'You didn't say if I could see him or not.'

'Oh, yes indeedy,' said Ben. 'It ain't every day we have visitors. He's inside there.'

The shack was gloomy inside and Virginia, standing six feet away, could discern nothing of the interior.

'You want me to bring him out?' asked Ben.

'Yes! You bring him out!'

Ben got up and went inside the shack. Virginia could hear a couple of metallic clicks and Ben's voice, speaking softly. In a moment he came out again, his hands at his sides, but no rat.

'Where is it?' asked Virginia.

'He thinks we're goin' some place,' said Ben. 'He's in here now.' He indicated his shirt. Ben sat down on the rickety chair and opened his shirt front. Virginia had a glimpse of the brown body of the rat and then Ben fumbled with his hand inside the shirt and brought the animal out, holding it by the back of the neck. He put it in his lap and it squatted there, darting its head about from time to time and once in a while hopping about on his thighs, its legs moving with such quick reflexes that it was impossible to follow the movement. It had a tapering tail fully as long as its body and when it was at rest the tail curved around on Ben's thigh until its tip lay beside the forefeet.

Virginia was delighted.

'It's lovely!' she said. 'Oh, it's *lovely*.'

'Most people don't like rats, but that's because they don't understand 'em,' Ben explained.

'Would he care if I touched him?'

'Not if you do it slow,' said Ben.

Virginia put two fingers on the rat's back and lightly stroked it. 'Oh, it feels funny. It's not soft. It's more like bristles.'

'What's your name?' asked Ben.

'Virginia Stewart. What does he like to eat?'

'Rats eat anything.'

'Could I bring him some cheese some time?'

'Yes — he likes cheese.'

'Hello, rat. Hello, rat-rat. What's your name, little rat? Look at his funny whiskers! And look at his ears!'

'He likes people when he gets to know 'em,' said Ben. 'I can see he'd take quite a shine to you.'

'Can he do any tricks?'

'Like a dog, you mean?'

'Yes.'

'No — rats are different. He's smart, though.'

'I think he's wonderful!' exclaimed Virginia.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Of course, he can travel around in my shirt. That's a trick.'

'Hello, little rat-rat. I'm going to bring you some cheese to eat.'

Virginia squatted down in front of Ben's knees and for a quarter of an hour they talked of rats and their habits and of the idiosyncrasies of this rat in particular.

'They're just like humans,' said Ben.

'They are?'

'Yes indeedy — he gets touchy and excited. If things don't work out just like he figures they ought to, why he has a nervous breakdown.'

'He does!'

'Yep. Won't eat. Gets the blues. Acts just like a human.'

'Do you give him aspirin?'

'No — I just try to think what he's thinkin' and then when I see what's botherin' him I fix it for him. Like the time he got honey-sick. He like to lost his mind over that.'

'Honey-sick?'

'Oh, he was in a bad way over that. You see I had a bottle with some honey in it and he licked the sticky part off the outside. Well, he loved it and he licked it clean and that just about drove him loco because he could see the honey inside the bottle but lick as he could, he couldn't taste it no more.'

'Oh, the poor little rat-rat!' said Virginia.

'He licked and licked and couldn't taste nothin' even though he could see all the nice honey through the glass. Well, he run around and round the bottle in a circle, cryin' like a baby. He'd sit and look at it and then rush up and try lickin' it again. And when he could see it but couldn't taste it he'd run again. Oh, he was gettin' desperate.'

'What did you do?'

'Well, that was before I was on to the ways of rats so I didn't do nothin'. I went off and left him while I attended to some

VERISIMILITUDE

business and an hour later I come back and he had went crazy.'

'Crazy!'

'Yes indeedy. He was layin' lookin' at that bottle and pantin' with his tongue hangin' out. And he was kind of in a stupor. I give his tail a tiny little pinch and he never knew it. I picked him up and he was like a dish rag. Didn't know nothin', didn't feel nothin' — just a complete nervous wreck, he was.'

'Oh, what a pity!' said Virginia.

'I felt right sorry for him and I knowed how he was sufferin' cause I've seen humans do the same thing when they lose all their money or can't get their own way about somethin'. That honey to him was lif'n death, yes indeedy. If he'd been a human he might of shot himself.'

'Daddy knew a man who shot himself in the depression.'

'That so? What for?'

'I forget. I think Daddy said he was caught in the crash.'

'Well, there you are. That human seen all the honey and couldn't get it so he couldn't stand it. This here rat was the same way. You wouldn't know it to look at him now.'

'He's a well rat now. How did he get over it?'

'When I seen what was the matter I took the bottle and smeared a little honey on the outside like it was before and set it down in front of him.'

'And that cured him!'

'No indeedy. He was too far gone for that. He just lay there limp with the honey in front of his nose. He was so sick he couldn't enjoy it. Oh, he was out of his head for fair.'

'Poor little ratty rat-rat.'

'Well, I caught on to a secret then, and I've always handled him by it ever since.'

'What was it?'

'I let him think he figures a problem out for himself. That gives him confidence and he gets well right away.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'What did you do?'

'While he was layin' there starin' glassy-eyed at nothing', I put a couple of drops of honey on his tail. You see how long his tail is?'

'Yes!'

'Well, I pulled it around and stuck the end of it in his mouth and there he was tastin' the one thing he had went crazy over when he couldn't get it. Then I left the bottle set where it was but I took the cork out. It wasn't one minute before he figured out he could put his tail down in the bottle and bring it out drippin' honey. He'd lick the tail clean and do it again.'

Virginia clapped her hands. 'Smart little rat!' she exclaimed.

'That's what he figured and that made him happy right away. After I figured he'd et enough I hid the bottle where he couldn't find it. That didn't bother him none at all. Next day I put the bottle back and he like to had a nervous breakdown all over again until I took the cork out for him. Then he put his tail in and got the honey. So that's how I come to learn that rats is smart but like humans they ain't smart enough. They go just so far and then they crack. It's a good education to have a rat.'

'I'll bring him a bottle of honey, shall I?'

'Or cheese. He's a great cheese eater.'

'I'll bring him a lot of things!' exclaimed Virginia. 'Isn't it nice that I came down here?'

'Yes indeedy; it's always nice to make new friends.'

'He ought to have a name besides plain rat. Don't you think so?'

'Maybe.'

'I'll see if I can find a good rat name, shall I?'

'Yes indeedy.'

A rustling of the bushes attracted their attention and Tex came into view on the trail over which Virginia had come. She looked at him in silence.

'Hello, Ben,' said Tex, focusing his eyes on Virginia.

'Hello,' said Ben.

Tex walked on, looking back until he disappeared from view.

'Who was that?' asked Virginia.

'Tex.'

'Who is Tex?'

'Just Tex — he lives up that way a little piece.'

'Maybe I ought to go home now.'

'Maybe you better,' said Ben. 'Maybe your mother is lookin' for you.'

Virginia stood up.

'Good-bye, rat-rat. See you later.' And to Ben she said, 'I'll come back to-morrow. No, to-morrow's Sunday and we'll go for a drive. But I'll come back on Monday, after school.'

'All right,' said Ben.

'Good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' said Ben.

Virginia ran along the trail. When she was partly screened by the chaparral she called gaily, 'I'll bring some cheese!' and she heard Ben's 'All right' as she went on. When she came upon Gosh's shack she slowed to a walk, and she was surprised to see a strange creature, hardly a man, standing beside the shack.

Gosh was amazed. Suddenly out of the bushes had come a little girl, dressed immaculately in pink and white, and he couldn't believe his eyes. He watched her follow the trail until she was out of sight.

'Well, for Gosh sakes,' he said, and he scratched his head.

Virginia came out of the chaparral and began to climb to the arroyo top. It had been a wonderful adventure. It was a perfectly fascinating place. There was nothing scary about it after all. That old man was an awfully nice old man and his pet rat was delightful. She'd be sure to see them again. Monday, after school. And that last one: he didn't look like a man at all, but a

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

gnome or an elf or one of those things. What an odd, interesting place it was down there. She was leaping up the trail so fast that she was out of breath. When she reached the top she turned and looked below. Six stories down was the chaparral. Unless you knew it, there was no way to tell that there were shacks in the chaparral and that men lived down there. Well, yes, by looking very, very closely you could make out a piece of a shack. But that wasn't where the rat lived; that was the shack where the gnome lived. Why, he couldn't have been much taller than she was. He looked something like Dopey in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. But the old man was really a very nice old man. She walked along the arroyo edge and scrambled over the hedge into her own garden and walked toward the house. A very nice old man, indeed.

Up here life was going on in its usual way. Celia was in the kitchen. Mother was somewhere in the house. Daddy would be home soon — he might even be home now. Virginia walked slowly through the garden. All that down below — all that queer strange way those queer strange men lived — was something Mother and Daddy didn't know about. What's on the arroyo bottom? 'Oh, just earth and dirt and weeds, I suppose', Daddy had said. 'Sand and underbrush', Mother had said. 'Nothin', Celia had said. None of them really knew anything about it. But now *she* knew. And somehow or other it meant a great deal more than just seeing the pet rat. That was the important part of it, that rat, but what a strange thing it all was — rat, old man, gnome — what a curious unexpected feeling it left in you.

It would be wonderful to rush into the house and tell Mother all about how rats had nervous breakdowns. It would be wonderful to pour all this new experience out and to ask questions about it. She would have done it, without doubt, a month ago, even a week ago. But now she walked soberly into the kitchen. Somehow she knew that she mustn't speak of

it to Mother or Daddy, or even to Celia or James or Adachi. None of them would feel it — none of them would understand it — probably none of them would even like it. It was another kind of world, that place down there, and it had nothing to do with this one up here. She would keep it a secret; not because it was bad or evil or anything like that, but because she was sure that if she talked to Mother about it, Mother might tell her that she mustn't go down there again. And she *had* to go down there again because she had promised to bring the rat some cheese. Monday. Later she might tell Mother. But not now. It would be her secret for a while.

She walked into the house whistling tunelessly and went upstairs to her room. From her bookcase she took a copy of *The Wind in the Willows* and opened it to the coloured illustrations of Rat and Mole. He really should have a name besides plain rat. She might be able to think of one and if the old man liked it, he could use it. It could be called Black Eyes or Sharp Ears. No — they weren't so good. It had a long tail, but that didn't seem to suggest much. It had sharp whiskers. How would that be for a name?

'Whiskers,' she said aloud. 'Whis-kers.'

Maybe.

She put the book away.

At dinner nothing was said about rat, arroyo, old men, or anything pertinent thereto. Mother asked if she had been to see Claire Ensley, and she was impelled to say yes, but faltered in time and said, 'No — I didn't go'. It would have been so easy to say yes. Then Daddy wanted to know what she had been doing all afternoon. Now if she had only said yes —

'Played in the garden — and in the lot.' At least that was true as far as it went. And it wasn't going any further because she turned the conversation by saying, 'Can I go to the movies to-night? Can I?'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'May I,' said Mother. 'Not can.'

'May I?' said Virginia.

'I suppose it could be arranged,' said Daddy seriously. 'We can carry it to the Supreme Court and win a close decision, provided the court isn't packed before we get it on the calendar.'

It was always supposed to be funny when Daddy talked like that. It didn't really mean anything. Mother laughed politely and Virginia said, 'Uh-huh'. She wished she knew why it was funny.

'What's packing a court?' she asked. 'Like sardines?'

'Absolutely,' said Daddy. 'You fish around until you find a judge who swims in the channel you want him to swim in. Then you haul him in and put him in your basket. When you get enough fish you pack them all together and you call it a court.' He laughed again. 'I'll tell Ralph Harmon Virginia said that. It'll tickle him.'

Virginia concluded that she had said something especially witty.

'Why don't we invite the Harmons to go with us to Monterey,' said Mother. 'Wouldn't that be tactful?'

'Decidedly,' said Daddy.

'I can endure her while you play golf with him,' said Mother, 'and perhaps he won't cough his cigar-cough quite as much as usual.'

'Optimist,' said Daddy. 'At any rate it would be a good chance to have a talk with him.'

'And it would be a nice thing for us to do,' Mother said. 'We really owe them something.'

'Worth a trial,' said Daddy.

'You could even let him win by a few strokes,' Mother said.

'No — that's asking too much,' said Daddy. 'Every man has his price, but mine is more than blowing birdies for a bank president.'

Now what were they talking about — blowing birdies for a bank president. Did that make sense?

VERISIMILITUDE

'If it's not like sardines,' asked Virginia, 'what's it like?'

'Packing a court, my sweet, is putting judges on the bench who are going to think just what you want them to think,' explained Daddy. 'And when that happens in the Supreme Court of the United States things have come to a pretty pass. Why, if it weren't for the sane decisions of the Supreme Court there's no telling where we'd be to-day. Believe me, we've all got to go to bat in 1940 or it's just too bad.'

It was all very confusing. Daddy meant something, no doubt, but the words conveyed little. Mother and Daddy went on talking about business and government and Ralph Harmon and something called the G.O.P., but Virginia concentrated on the slice of melon that Celia served for dessert. The important thing was that she could go to the movies if she wanted to.

There was no opportunity to go down to the arroyo bottom for the next two days. On Sunday morning Daddy played golf. In the afternoon they all went for a drive to Santa Barbara and back and the drive took most of the day. Sunday night the McCleans came in for bridge and Virginia went to bed. But Monday after school she was free. And there was no doubt about the order of things from four to six that afternoon.

First she coaxed, cajoled, and annoyed Celia into giving her a cheese sandwich even though Celia had orders not to do such things. Six minutes later down in the chaparral a rat was being fed the cheese and Ben ate the bread himself.

'How would Whiskers be for a name?'

'That's a good name. It's up to him, though, and he's kinda particular.'

'Maybe we can think of something better.'

'That's good enough,' said Ben. 'Whisk, for short.'

'Whisk,' said Virginia critically. 'It might do. I always name everything. Do you?'

'Well — no, not *always*.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'When I was little I used to play with dolls and I had a lot of names for them.'

'I reckon you did.'

'And my knees. I bet you can't guess what their names are.'

'Well — let's see,' mused Ben.

Virginia sat down on the sand beside Ben who was sitting on the broken chair. She pulled her skirt above her knee-caps. Ben studied them.

'David and Goliath.'

'No! Guess again!'

'Trade and Mark,' said Ben.

'No!'

'I reckon I give up.'

'This one's Paul and this one's Pauline.'

'Well — well.'

'I named my feet, too. Can you guess what I call them?'

'Well — they're right nice little feet, all dressed up in shoes and socks.'

'You'll never guess them. I better tell you. This one's Crystal and this one's Bristol.'

'Crystal and Bristol — well, them's awful good names for a pair of feet. I never could have guessed them. I ain't bright at names the way you are.'

'But you've got a name yourself, haven't you?'

'Oh, yes. Yes indeedy.'

'What is it?'

'Ben.'

'Ben what?'

'Oh, just Ben. Ben Smith, Ben Jones, Ben Whoozit — it don't make much difference no more.'

'Ben Whoozit? Oh, you're fooling me! Your name's not Whoozit!'

VERISIMILITUDE

'Well, no — rightly, it ain't.'

'Haven't you got a last name at all?'

'Well — I don't need one. No use havin' something you don't need, is there?' Ben looked at the rat. It was sitting on his thigh, finishing the cheese, eating rapidly and paying no attention to anything but its food. Ben addressed it: 'Do you want a monicker, young fellow?'

'A what?' asked Virginia.

'I ast him if he wanted a monicker.'

'Oh,' said Virginia. She considered for a moment. 'What's a monicker?'

'A name.'

'I never heard the word before.'

'Monicker's a good word.'

Ben leaned forward, lowering his head close to the rat. Then he looked up and nodded briskly, and smiled at Virginia. 'Yes — he said he'd like a monicker.'

'He did!'

'Yes indeedy.'

'He said something to you just then?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Can he *talk*?'

'No, not exactly talkin' — but I can make him out.'

'Ask him something else!'

'Well, let's see what we can ask him —' Ben thought for a moment and gave Virginia a wink. Again he bent forward and whispered unintelligibly to the rat. But he couldn't seem to understand the rat's answer, for he had to listen closely and ask 'What?' and then listen again. 'Ah,' he said in concurrence. 'That's right.'

'What did he say? What did he say?' demanded Virginia.

'I ast him if he knowed your name.'

'Did he? Did he know it?'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'He said it begun with a V, and when I ast again he kind of said "Virginia".'

Virginia squealed and clapped her hands. 'That's right! That's it! How did you know to make him say it?'

'You told us last time. He remembered it.'

'Why, Whiskers! What a smart little rat you are! Make him say something else.'

'I can tell without askin' now,' said Ben. 'He's sayin' "More cheese — more cheese".'

'All gone,' said Virginia. 'All gone, Whisk.' She looked up and said, 'I don't like Whisk. Let's try something else. Whisk, Whiskers, Wicky — I like Wicky! What do you think of that — Ben?'

It was the first time she had called him Ben. Neither of them reacted to it, though they both noticed it.

'Wicky is pretty good,' said Ben.

'Your name is Wicky,' said Virginia to the rat. It continued to sit on Ben's knee, twitching its whiskers and occasionally its tail.

'He likes it all right, even if he don't say nothin',' said Ben. 'He's that way.'

'He ought to be baptized to make it right. Are you baptized, Ben?'

'Oh, yes indeedy.'

'Can you remember what it was like?'

'No, I can't hardly recall it now.'

'Can't you remember *anything* about it?'

'No — I reckon I can't.'

'Well, try, Ben! Try hard.'

'T'ain't no use. I bet you can't remember bein' baptized eithar. Or was you?'

'Yes, I was baptized. I didn't know it but Mother told me about it later. Daddy says it's all a lot of nonsense, but they had

VERISIMILITUDE

it done just to please my grandmother. She died. We'll baptize Wicky, shall we?'

'Well — I don't know,' said Ben doubtfully. 'He might not like it.'

'I know they sprinkle water on you, but I don't know just what to say. Do you?'

'No — Wicky don't like water put on him.'

'We can just pretend it's water. But I don't know what it is they say when they do it. Why can't you remember, Ben?'

'Because it was sixty-two years ago. Hold on a minute! Sixty, sixty-one, sixty-two — maybe it was sixty-three.'

'Are you sixty-three!'

'Seems like that ought to be right.'

'Wow!'

Virginia lay back on the sand, leaning on her elbows. She stared up at Ben with renewed interest.

'I'm ten.'

'I thought you was about that.'

'But I'm old for my age, my parents say.'

'Yes indeedy,' said Ben.

'I'll be eleven in December. How old is Wicky?'

'Don't rightly know,' said Ben. 'He was just a little fellow when I found him so I guess he's a couple of years old.'

'Where'd you find him?'

'Found him almost froze to death in a dump. Let's see — where was that place? Back east a ways. Oklahoma or Kansas or some place. Can't recollect what town I was in at the time.'

'Tell me some more, Ben.'

'Well — it was 'bout dusk and I was pokin' around this-here dump and it was a right cold spell — maybe it was Colorado. Now I ain't sure. But this here baby rat was layin' there stiff-like because tractors was ploughin' up this dump because they was goin' to burn it. One of them tractors turned up a rat's

nest and this—here baby rat got lost from his family somehow. I guess all his brothers and sisters scooted t'other way, or maybe something hit him and kinda knocked him out. But I seen him layin' there still—like so I says, "Well, did you get cold?" and I picked him up thinkin' he was dead or maybe froze. So I put him inside my shirt and blamed if he didn't thaw out or wake up or something and there I was with him on my hands.'

'Gee — that's wonderful!'

'So I give him some victuals and —'

'Some what?'

'Victuals.'

'*What?*'

'Something to eat.'

'Oh.'

'And he et it and I kept him all night. Well, next mornin' I started headin' south because of the cold snap and I carried him along inside my shirt. He was young and got used to it, and that's how he got tame. I don't suppose he'd live like any ordinary rat now because he's used to livin' the way he lives with me.'

'Why, you like living with Ben, don't you, Wicky?'

'We get along pretty well,' said Ben. 'We don't hardly ever go hungry.'

'Ben, if you run out of food I can get some as easy as anything!'

'That's right kind of you,' said Ben.

'We always have a lot of things in the house. Celia does all the buying, and Mother says she buys enough for ten.'

'Well, if you got somethin' to spare some time, I'd be much obliged.'

'I'll bring something every time I come!' said Virginia. 'I can't bring much at a time because I don't want Mother or — that is — well, I'll — I'll bring some things. You wait and see.'

VERISIMILITUDE

'Don't go gettin' yourself in trouble with your parents.'

'Oh, they'd be pleased, Ben. They'd like you if they just knew you.'

'You never can tell about people,' said Ben.

'You can't?'

'No, never can.'

'What can't you tell?'

'How they'll fit.'

'Together, you mean?'

'Yes indeedy. Now you and I got to be friends straight off. But you never can tell about other people likin' your friends.'

'Oh, but Mother and Daddy are wonderful. You'd like them, and they'd like you.'

'I reckon they love you, too.'

Virginia was watching the rat.

'You got any brothers and sisters?' asked Ben.

'No.'

'Only child?'

'Yes. Does he like vegetables?'

'Some.'

'And fruit?'

'We eat almost anything,' said Ben.

'I'll bring something to-morrow, but I don't know what it'll be.'

'Hear that,' said Ben to the rat. 'Virginia is goin' to bring you a present.'

'He knows my name already, doesn't he?'

'Yes indeedy. See them whiskers twitch? That means "Good!"'

'Does it really?'

'Uh-huh — when he moves 'em t'other way that means "T'ain't so good!"'

'What's it mean when he sniffs with his nose?'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'That means "What in thunderation's that?"'

'It does!'

'And when he scoots into my shirt front, that means "Look out — somethin's a comin'!"'

'Pretty soon I'll be able to understand him too! Won't I?'

'Yes indeedy.'

'I never thought I'd learn rat talk.'

'You never had no pets?'

'No.'

'No dog or cat or nothin'?''

'No.'

'That's too bad.'

'Have you had a lot of animals?'

'Oh, no, but I always seemed to keep something around me. I had two or three dogs.'

'At once?'

'No. Different times. There was Rex and Rover and there was little Willie and —'

'Little Willie?'

'He was a terrier. They're awful smart, them terriers. Then once I had an awful smart cat.'

'Mother hates cats.'

'Well — you got to get on to 'em.'

'What did you call the cat?'

'Called it Squeak.'

'Why?'

'Cause it squoke.'

'What else did you have?'

'Lots of things from time to time. I reckon I can tame most anything that comes along.'

'Wild things?'

'Yes — wild things is the easiest. Anybody can do it if they want to. It's just bein' kind to things and puttin' yourself in

VERISIMILITUDE

their place so you can think what they're thinkin'. 'T'ain't hard if you set your mind to it. Once I tamed a daddy-long-legs.'

'You did?'

'Yes indeedy, and he was the smartest bug you ever want to sec. He et spiders, too.'

'I wish we had one here!'

'Maybe one will come walkin' in some day.'

'Ben, let's get a lot of live things down here! Shall we?'

'I reckon they'll just naturally congregate if we let 'em.'

'That'll be great fun, won't it?'

'Yes indeedy.'

'I certainly like it down here, Ben. It's like camping. I went camping once in the High Sicrras. Where did you camp before you camped here, Ben?'

'Oh, I been all over,' said Ben, 'back east, down south, out west, up north, every place.'

'I went east once. But I was only a little baby and I don't remember it. I've been to the San Diego zoo, though.'

'Yes indeedy,' said Ben.

'Oh, Ben! Do you know what?'

'What?'

'We can have a zoo right here!'

'Maybe so.'

'A real live zoo, I mean! And you can be the manager.'

'Where'll we keep the elephants?'

'No — I don't mean a pretend zoo. I mean real live things. Wicky is the first. And you're the best Wicky, so don't you care. Then we'll get wild spiders, and maybe you can find a daddy-long-legs and tame it and, let's see, what else is there?'

'I seen a lady-bug yesterday.'

'We'll catch a lady-bug! And butterflies!'

'And ants,' said Ben. 'We got a lot of them.'

'We'll make an ant house!'

'There's lizards,' said Ben.

'We'll get a lizard!'

'And birds,' said Ben.

'We can put out crumbs for the birds!'

'Rabbits live in the brush, too,' suggested Ben.

'Maybe you can tame a rabbit, Ben! Could you, do you think?'

'I can tame most anything at all.'

'Oh, Ben! We'll start to-morrow.'

'Sure enough.'

'And the gnome! He can be part of it.'

'Gnome?' said Ben.

'What's his name?' asked Virginia.

'Who?'

'That funny little man who lives down that way.'

'Oh — his name's Gosh.'

'Gosh!'

'That's his name.'

'It's like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*! He can be Dopey.'

'Well — he is kinda dopey,' agreed Ben.

'This is our house in the forest. I'll be Snow White. Gosh can be Dopey and you can be all the rest of the dwarfs. It won't be a zoo after all, Ben. It'll be Snow White and everything and you'll have to go to work in the mine, and the animals, mostly Wicky, will come and tell you that the bad queen is after me. And we need buzzards. Do you suppose you could tame a couple of buzzards?'

'Well — I don't know,' said Ben, bewildered by the rapidly changing scene. 'I ain't never had a carrion crow.'

'Can you whistle while you work?'

'Oh, yes, I can do that, all right.'

'We can take turns. Part of the time I'll be the prince. And

VERISIMILITUDE

you can be the huntsman. Oh, Ben, isn't this fun? Let's start now! I'll go over there and get lost in the forest!

'Well—' said Ben, 'It's pretty late to start playin' a game now. Maybe to-morrow.'

The sun was setting. Virginia let the queen's forest dissolve into the chaparral. 'I guess I do have to go home,' she admitted. 'But we'll play to-morrow!'

'Yes indeedy,' said Ben. 'Wicky has to go into his house now.' He got up and carried the rat into the shack. Virginia looked in, standing a few feet in front of the doorway. After a moment she walked to the entrance and peered in. Inside the light was dim and she could barely distinguish the cage with the treadmill. But it wasn't a shack; it was a fantastic little brown cottage. And it wasn't hidden in the chaparral of the arroyo bottom, but rather was ensconced in the sylvan depths of the Royal Forest. No old man lived hercin, but a family of dwarfs, and in the surrounding glades wild life abounded. Through the greenwood were secret trails, and high on a cliff overlooking the realm was the castle in which Snow White lived. And in that castle lived the wicked queen called Mother and—no, that wasn't right. Mother couldn't be the wicked queen. How could that be worked now? Celia! She'd do!

'Celia's the wicked queen!' Virginia told Ben.

'Is she?' said Ben, not understanding.

'She's awfully wicked,' said Virginia, 'but to-morrow I'll escape and get lost in the forest.'

'That's right,' said Ben.

'It'll be grand, Ben. Wicky and I will clean your house and everything!'

'Think of that,' said Ben, coming out of the shack.

'I've got to go home now, but I'll make it all up while I lie in bed to-night. Will you help me while you're down here?'

'Oh, yes indeedy,' said Ben.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'It'll be such fun! Good night, Ben!'

'You know how to go?'

'Oh, sure. If I got lost the animals would show me.'

Virginia ran through the chaparral. 'See you to-morrow,' she called.

'Good night,' called Ben. He watched her run into the bushes, and for a minute he stood looking toward the place where she had disappeared. She must be a bright little girl because some of the things she had said, though they were hard to understand, made sense. But wicked queens and dwarfs and buzzards and such . . . It must have meant something. Children are like animals; you got to put yourself in their place in order to figure out what they're thinking. Well, that was all right. He'd be glad to see her again. Nicc little girl, Virginia.

II

The old order had changed, and for Virginia life took on a new dimension. There was the same street car and the same conductor and the same motorman and the same rattlety-rattle clink-clink. But the conventional routine which had deposited her at home around four o'clock every afternoon became significant toward a further end, and the efficiency of the routine became important, even vital. There were times, of course, when the routine was interrupted. Sometimes school activities forced her to remain after classes, but usually that could be avoided. Sometimes Mother met her with the Pontiac and the street car ride was eliminated, though that even was rare. Sometimes she rode home with Claire Ensley and Claire's mother, and sometimes Claire Ensley rode home on the street car, too. But the habitual latitude and variety of the hours between four and six, that indiscriminate time when you had

nothing much to do, was now seasoned with interest and excitement. You could think about it during the day in that place-where-you-were-alone, and when the day came around toward three o'clock the important thing was to get home and down to the arroyo bottom as quickly as possible. For down there was a rich and fascinating world where a friend was waiting for your arrival and where a tame rat was waiting to play and be fed. The thought of it made a day ordinarily drab with arithmetic and grammar ('Case is that property of a noun or pronoun which indicates use in the sentence') and penmanship and history, delightfully and secretly endurable. Fractions and integers and the effects of the Stamp Act were things to be considered in their place, but beyond their world with its dry smell of powdered chalk dust and the slippery glazed feel of a desk top and Miss Roberts's everlasting expression 'It doesn't make any material difference, but' (her *real* name was Material Difference in that place-where-you-were-alone) — beyond all that lay the chaparral in the sunlight and the trail and Ben and Wicky, waiting, watching, expectant.

And it was not only Wicky who was the chief attraction. Ben himself was a strange and interesting man, totally unlike anybody she had ever met before. New and odd things were constantly cropping up about him. He knew so much. There was hardly any question he couldn't answer. In fact, there were none. And on top of that he enjoyed having questions put to him. He'd always have some kind of answer. 'Where was the end of the world?' There wasn't any because the world was round like an orange, and where was the end of an orange? That explained that, all right. 'Why do men have whiskers when ladies don't?' Well, it seemed that ladies did have whiskers, after all (and what a laugh *that* had been), but they were tiny little soft whiskers and didn't show. That explained that, all right. 'What did it mean when Daddy said a man was a good

Republican?' It meant he had some money in the bank and he was afraid he might lose it. So that explained that. Just ask Mother and Daddy questions like those and you wouldn't get the same answers at all. They really *didn't know* the answers the way Ben did. Or ask Celia! She didn't know anything. But Ben knew something about everything there was.

And if it interested Virginia to elicit information from Ben, it also interested Ben to hear from her, bits now and then, of her environment, a world which Ben knew existed but which he had never experienced.

When, for example, Ben learned that Daddy was a vice-president of a bank, he seemed to think that was something amazing. He explained, of course, that he had never, to the best of his knowledge, seen a vice-president of a bank, and he wanted to know what one was like — what he said, what he did, what he ate, even what he looked like and if he always carried hundred dollar bills in all his pockets. Virginia's curt answers only seemed to make him repeat the questions or ask others, just as his replies as to how trap-door spiders learned to make trap-doors, and if Wicky knew Spanish words as well as English words, and if it took a chicken to lay an egg to make another chicken how was the first chicken made — his glib and often provocative answers only inspired further questions.

Sometimes they played games — Snow White, zoo, exploration, hospital, and original games involving Wicky. Ben wasn't very smart, but he was willing and as he always said, 'You can't learn an old dog new tricks'.

'Why can't you, Ben?'

'Cause he never forgets the old ones.'

It was on a Wednesday afternoon that Ben brought the remodelled bird cage out of the shack and for the first time Virginia saw Wicky run on the treadmill within the cage. She was delighted, 'Run, Wicky! Run! Catch 'em — catch

'em,' she shouted. They made a game of it, and the game was to see who could keep Wicky running while the other pretended to be a dog or a cat who was in hot pursuit.

'Or a coyote,' said Ben. 'He's scared of them.'

'I'm a coyote now. Start running, Wicky!'

She made a noise in her throat which was an original interpretation of how she thought a coyote might act. The rat ran on the wire frame of the wheel making it whirl at great speed while Virginia pretended pursuit. 'Hurry up, Wicky. I'm catching you! Run! Run! There, he's in the arroyo now. But the old coyote's right after him. Run, Wicky, run! There, he's home now and the old coyote couldn't catch him. You're too smart, aren't you, Wicky?'

Ben laughed and Virginia laughed, and Heavy, attracted by all this commotion, came through the chaparral to see what the hell was going on.

And it was on that same Wednesday afternoon that Celia missed a loaf of bread and a can of pineapple. She blamed herself for absent-mindedness, but on Thursday a can of peas and a can of corn disappeared, and she began to suspect either the bottled-water man, who had come that day, or the boy who delivered for the White Swan dry cleaners. And she concluded that whichever one of them did it he was certainly a fast worker because she couldn't remember turning her back on him at all. She said nothing to Mrs. Stewart about it, but she decided to be on her guard after this.

Then there were days when Ben and Virginia didn't play any game at all, but just sat and talked foolishness or asked riddles. And one day when the riddles ran out Ben invented the berry game. It consisted of seeing who could out-berry the other by naming kinds of berries in alternate turns. Ben started with strawberry and Virginia countered with blackberry, and Ben said gooseberry and Virginia put in blueberry, and in a short

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

while they had gone down the list into the more difficult items as loganberry and chinaberry and holly-berry with each striving to find the ultimate, until Virginia, caught on elderberry, tried to palm off library, calling it lie-berry, but Ben would not allow it, and won the contest thereby.

But whatever the mood and the humour might be it was always interesting and fun and exciting. Sometimes they talked seriously about animals and flowers and birds and stars. Then there was the time she had hurried down the trail with some link sausage ('scooped' as Ben put it) from the refrigerator when Celia was in the dining-room, and found Ben smiling and saying, 'Got something to show you I bet you never seen before.'

'What Ben? What is it?'

'Surprise.'

'What kind? Shall I close my eyes?'

'Nope.'

'Then where is it?'

'Near by.'

'What is it?'

'Surprise.'

'Now you tell me, Ben, or I'll take this sausage straight home!'

'Ho —' said Ben, 'maybe I don't eat sausage.'

'Yes, you do! You said yesterday you did. I was only fooling. What's the surprise, Ben? Tell me now!'

'Well,' said Ben, 'look around.'

'I am looking. I don't see anything different.'

'You was warm when you looked over that way.'

Virginia moved in the direction indicated.

'Gettin' warm,' said Ben.

She was close to the chaparral a few yards from Ben's shack.

'Warmer — warmer — hot! Virginia's hot now.'

'Where — I don't see anything.'

'Stand still,' said Ben. 'Now look left a little and up.'

Virginia peered into the oak thicket.

'Oh, Ben, what is it?' she asked, looking at a small woven brown object, hooked bag-like between two branches, slightly beyond her reach.

Ben came over beside her. 'Cocoon,' he said. Together they studied the object.

'What's in it?' asked Virginia.

'Life,' said Ben.

'An animal?'

'A caterpillar.'

'Will it come out?'

'Some day.'

'When?'

'Can't say. Right now she's just a little worm-like thing in there that's asleep and don't know much, but some day she'll grow up and come out of the cocoon, and she won't be a caterpillar no more, but she'll be a butterfly all coloured pretty.'

'Oh, Ben, I wish we could see it happen!'

'Maybe we will. But we'll have to watch close because one day, before we know it, she'll be growed up and she'll go flyin' off to see the world.'

'It'll happen in the day time, won't it?'

'Oh, yes — some bright day.'

'We can watch it every day, Ben. You can watch it and when I'm here I can watch it. I bet we see her fly away, Ben! What do you bet?'

'Shouldn't be surprised.'

The cocoon set the key for the afternoon's discussion.

'We're getting a lot of live things down here,' said Virginia. They went back to the entrance of the shack. Ben sat on the rickety chair and she sat on the sand in front of him. 'But you're

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

the best Wicky, there's no doubt about that, is there, Ben?

'Nope,' said Ben.

'Did that lady-bug that flew away ever come back, Ben?'

'Never did,' said Ben. 'Leastways I never saw it again.'

'Shall we go over to the seventh tee and look at our trap-door spiders?'

'I guess not to-day. Let's set here for a spell.'

'What other live things can we get, Ben?'

'Well — there's plants. Don't forget the plant world is just as alive as the animal world.'

'Then life's everywhere, isn't it?'

'Yes indeedy.'

'What is life, Ben?'

Ben hesitated. Virginia looked up at him expectantly. He rubbed his five-day stubble of grey beard. He pursed his lips and squinted his watery green eyes, and said, 'Well —'

'You know, don't you?'

'Oh, yes — yes indeedy.'

'Well, what is it?' Virginia repeated. She sat on the sand, half reclining on one elbow, brushing a few grains from her navy blue skirt and examining her white middy blouse. When there was no answer she looked up again in mild surprise. Ben was frowning in a labour of thought. He inhaled a deep breath and said, 'It's the opposite of bein' dead'.

'I know that, but I mean what is it?'

'Well — it's knowin' things and bein' able to tell other things from yourself.'

'Can Wicky do that?'

'Sure he can.'

'Can a bug?'

'Yes indeedy — you seen how a bug walks around and kind of feels things out. He's figurin', "Now this is a rock and this-here is sand and over there's my house". That's because he's alive.'

VERISIMILITUDE

Virginia gave it some thought. She sat up and locked her arms around her knees and shook her head in order to throw her braids back off her shoulders.

'It's funny, isn't it. I never thought about it before.'

'T'ain't funny. Some smart feller said once, "Life's a serious thing; very few of us get out of it alive".'

'Oh, I don't think I'll ever die, Ben,' said Virginia lightly. 'I suppose you will, though. Old people always do.'

'I reckon,' said Ben.

'But what I want to know is — how did it start?'

'Life?'

'Yes — how did it begin?'

'Well, in the beginning, first there was the word.'

'What word?'

'*The* word.'

'Any word — like pachyderm or carburetter? We had them in spelling to-day. "You can correct each other's papers", Miss Roberts said, "and those in the front row may correct their own. It doesn't make any material difference". She always says that. I got ninety-six.'

'You must be a good speller.'

'I am. What was the first word you were talking about?'

'The word of God.'

'What did he say?'

'He said, "Let there be light!"'

'Was it dark?'

'Not after he said that about light.'

'Then what did he do?'

'Then he made life.'

'Out of what?'

'The firmament.'

'The *what*?'

'Firmament.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'What's that?'

'That was all there was at the time. He didn't have much to work with but he kept at it until he got it the way he wanted it. By that time he was all wore out, so he called it Sunday and laid off.'

Virginia was having difficulty with the mental image. 'But I don't see what life is yet, Ben. Was it like making something out of mud?'

'Somethin' like it.'

'Well, did God make everything that's alive here in the arroyo bottom — Wicky and ants and bugs and you and me?'

'Well, he got it started a long time ago, and it's been goin' on ever since.'

'What keeps it going?'

'His plan.'

'Well, did he know what he was doing?'

'Yes, and no,' said Ben.

'Ben, I wish you'd tell me better. I can't make much sense out of it.'

'Well, look here, I'll think about it, and figure it out, and in the meantime you ask your Mother to explain it. I bet she can do it twice as good as I can.'

'All right! I'll ask her to-night!'

'I'd kind of like to know what she says,' said Ben. 'If you can remember what she says you can tell me.'

'I'll tell you, Ben. Isn't that funny? You always tell me things, but now I'll tell you!'

'Yes indeedy.'

Mother's answer that night just before Virginia went to bed was disappointing. It was almost nine o'clock and Mother came in to kiss her good night, and was promptly faced with the question: 'Mother, how did life start?'

'Oh, that's a long story,' said Mother. 'It's bed time now.'

VERISIMILITUDE

'But I want to know what life is.'

'Some day you will.'

'When?'

'When you're in your teens.'

It was all exasperating. 'When you're in your teens' was the most unsatisfactory of answers. Time and again she had been stopped by these words. She was going to be allowed to carry a compact and a lipstick, but not until she was in her teens; Mother had agreed to cut her hair and wave it, but not until she was in her teens; some day she could use perfume, but not until she was in her teens. And now a simple question that *anybody* ought to be able to answer was put off by the aggravating 'Wait until you're in your teens'. Then Mother kissed her good night and turned out the light and went downstairs.

Before making the trip to the arroyo bottom after school the next day Virginia went into the house through the kitchen door, and walked into the library. She knew what to do about the evasive question of what constituted life. Material Difference, when questioned during recess, hadn't known any more about it than Ben and Mother. But at home in the library on a stand was Daddy's large heavy dictionary. She had been taught how to use a dictionary in school, and to this unabridged court of last resort she now turned. It was an awkward, clumsy book, too heavy to be handled easily, but there was L and la and le and li, and there it was, 'life'. She bent over the big book and read 'Life, the state or fact of being alive'. Then there was a lot more stuff the way there always is in dictionaries and she skimmed over remaining definitions, finding nothing as clear as the first explanation, until the thing was dissipated into 'life-belt' and 'life-blood' and 'life-boat', which was off the track altogether. It was another impasse.

'The state or fact of being alive' — just think — all the words there were in that dictionary and it couldn't say anything

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

better than that. There was something to this problem that she didn't understand, but whatever it was she'd find it out. It was annoying, like an itch. She closed the dictionary, giving it a scornful glance, and walked through to the kitchen. Celia was nowhere to be seen. She opened the cool closet, and took a can of soup and a jar of chipped beef and walked out of the house and down the trail.

III

It had been almost three weeks since she and Ben had become friends. In that interval she had visited the arroyo an even dozen times. It was no longer an adventure, but an accepted procedure. Once or twice Mother would inquire of her whereabouts, but it was impossible to tell Mother about Ben and Wicky and the arroyo now. It was too late. When she was in her teens — then she would tell her. Mother supposed that she played at school or played with Claire Ensley, and as Mother was usually out in the afternoons it really didn't make a great deal of difference. Material difference — that was what it didn't make. 'No material difference,' she said as she walked down the trail, adapting the words to the melody of 'He's a Jolly Good Fellow':

No Material Difference,
No Material Difference,
No Material Difference,
For Ben gets a can of soup.

Gosh watched her pass by on the trail through the chaparral, and he grinned his toothless grin, and she waved at him and marched on. Ben would be glad to have the soup and the meat, but next time she came she was going to bring him a real surprise. She had discovered that he shaved once a week and that

VERISIMILITUDE

it was a painful event because he had an old and inferior razor, and he wished he had a better one. Next time she came she was going to bring Ben Daddy's little black box containing a beautiful yellow safety razor and some blades and a styptic pencil and a shaving stick. Daddy would never miss it because Mother had given him an electric razor last Christmas and he never used the old one any more. Well, hardly ever. Probably he'd forgotten all about it by this time, and Ben could just as well have it. Daddy didn't need it, and she had heard Ben say, 'No use havin' something you don't need, is there?' And she had heard Daddy say, 'You can always tell a gentleman by the condition of his razor'. When you put the two together it simply meant that Daddy's un-needed razor could help Ben be a gentleman.

No Material Difference,
No Material Difference,
No Material Difference,
For Ben gets a razor blade.

But Ben didn't know anything about this yet, and she mustn't sing about it or he'd catch on. She dropped the lyrics to a hum. Before she saw Ben she heard a hammering, and as she came into the sandy clearing she saw that he was at work making a door for his shack.

'It's October,' said Ben, when Virginia asked him what he wanted a door for. 'And it gets chilly at night. If I figure on stayin' on here a while yet I might as well fix this-here place up comfortable-like.'

'I didn't know you were a carpenter, Ben.'

'Oh, yes indeedy.'

'Were you a regular carpenter once?'

'No, not exactly.'

'What business were you in, Ben?'

'Well, it's hard to recollect 'em all. Once I was in the harness

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

business. Once I was a fruit picker. Once I worked in a ice-house. Once I sold mules.'

'A mule salesman?'

'Uh-huh — then I been in the junk business and the odds-and-ends business. Once I repaired gas stoves. Once I was in the salvage business — that's about the same as the junk business. Fancier name, that's all.'

'We have a gas stove. If it ever gets out of order you must come up and fix it.'

'Yes indeedy. Once I was a night watchman.' Ben stared up at the arroyo cliff, concentrating on his business recapitulation. 'Once I fixed bicycles. Once I was a farm hand. Once I was in a slaughter house. Once I was in a livery stable. Once I sold patent medicine — tried to, that is. The patent medicine business ain't no good. I'd advise you to keep out of it.'

'All right, I will, Ben.'

'Once I sharpened knives and scissors and such. Once I sold fancy buggy whips — tried to, that is. That's a business to keep out of, too.'

'Buggy whip business?'

'Yes indeedy. Once I repaired window glass and sold window cleaner and wall paper — tried to, that is. You want to keep out of any business where you have to sell anything. Too hard to convince people. I like a business that comes to you. There a man can expand and study it and be his own boss like the junk business. I was a right good junk man. Still am, too. Kinda got my heart in it. What you got there?'

'Soup and meat.'

'Well, now that's right kind of you.'

Ben always said that. No matter what she brought he always said, 'Now, that's right kind of you'. Next time when she brought the razor he'd say the same words again. Wouldn't he be surprised though?

VERISIMILITUDE

'When are you going to shave again?'

Ben rubbed his beard. 'Oh — long 'bout middle of next week.'

'That's right, Ben. Don't you shave until next week!'

'Why?'

'Because to-day's Thursday and I won't be here again until Monday. We're going away on a trip over the week-end, and Mr. and Mrs. Harmon are going with us. I'll be here Monday, though, after school.'

'That's nice,' said Ben.

'Promise not to shave?'

'I promise.'

'Mother and Daddy don't like the Harmons, but they have to be nice to them. Where's Wicky?'

'Inside.'

'May I bring him out?'

'Sure enough. I reckon he knows you as well as he knows me now.'

Virginia went into the dingy shack and opened the door of the cage. With a little coaxing the rat came to her hand, and she carried it outside to Ben.

'Open that jar of meat, Ben, so I can give him some. He wants his dinner.'

Ben sat on his broken chair, and Virginia sat on a box, and together they fed the rat. She sat with her knees apart so that her skirt formed a valley between her thighs and Wicky sat in this valley and nibbled chipped beef.

'He says it's good. I can tell by the way his whiskers twitch,' said Virginia. 'See?'

'That's just what he's sayin',' agreed Ben, purloining a pinch of the beef from time to time.

'Oh, how's our cocoon?' she asked, twisting on the box in order to look over her shoulder.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Still there,' said Ben. 'Nothin' come out yet. October's pretty late. Maybe nothin' will.'

'I couldn't find out what life was,' said Virginia. 'Nobody would tell me.'

'No?'

'There's something funny about it. We'll find out yet.'

'Well,' said Ben, 'I been thinkin' how to answer you, and I reckon you might ask your Sunday school teacher to tell you the story of the creation.'

'Why, I don't go to Sunday school, Ben!'

'You don't?'

'No. Some children have to, but I never did. Did you?'

'Yes indeedy. I went to Sunday school every day of my life.'

'Oh, Ben, you did not!'

'Yes, I did.'

'No — every *Sunday* of your life.'

'Well — that's what I meant,' said Ben, mollified.

'Mother and Daddy don't believe in religion.'

'They don't?'

'Of course not. Here, Wicky, don't you bite my fingers! Give me some more meat, Ben.'

Ben was frowning. He handed her a pinch of chipped beef, saying, 'The Bible tells you all about how life begun. Didn't your parents ever teach you nothin' out of the Bible?'

'No.'

'Never?'

'Why, no, Ben — *never*.'

'Well, if I had a nice little girl like Virginia I'd see to it she got some Bible-learnin'.'

'Oh, I know about the Bible. I've heard it read in school.'

'Well, that's better,' said Ben.

'Sometimes the teacher reads it out loud. Sometimes the

VERISIMILITUDE

Principal reads it. I know about the Bible. Honest, I do! It sounds awful.'

'Well — ' Ben hesitated.

'It sounds simply *awful*, Ben.'

'Yes, but — '

'Wait, Ben. Let me be the Bible now! Here, you hold Wicky.' She closed her knees and put her hands, palms together, devoutly before her breast. 'Listen, Ben, the Bible sounds something like this. Listen, now.' She spoke in a doleful and dreary inflexion. 'Jesus cometh unto Israel and spoketh unto Cain and Abel and he sayeth unto them, "Yea, by the still waters she is finer than fine gold so be ye somethin' or other" — isn't that just what it sounds like, Ben? Why does it have to sound that way for, Ben?'

'I don't know,' admitted Ben, 'but it always does sound somethin' like that.'

'And you ought to see the funny face the supervisor makes when *he* reads it. Something like this.' She drew her lower jaw and the corners of her mouth down in a half-witted grimace and stared up at the sky. 'Claire Ensley and I always get the giggles when he reads it. "Blaw blaw of the blaw blaw," he goes. "Blaw blaw".'

'T'ain't no laughin' matter, the Bible,' said Ben seriously. 'Don't your parents let you go to no church?'

'No, we never go to church. I know where there is one, though!'

'Where?'

'Right up there. You go across Palm Drive two blocks and you come to a little church. Daddy says it's hard-up.'

'Hard-up?'

'That's what he says.'

'I ain't been in a church for twenty years,' said Ben, 'but it's right to go just the same.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Daddy makes fun of that church up on Palm Drive.'

'He does?'

'Yes. He says it's a de-tri-ment to the neighbourhood.'

'A what?'

'Well — he means it's a nuisance.'

'Oh.'

'Because he doesn't like the music it makes. It goes yow-yow, Ben.'

'Yow-yow?'

'Yes — it's got an organ and every Sunday the organ plays the same things over and over and the people sing the same words over and over. It sounds awful.'

'But church music is sacred,' said Ben. 'I never heard it called awful before. Are you sure your Daddy said that?'

'He said the organ wheezes. When the wind is right you can hear it all the way to our house. It's just the same every Sunday, Ben' — she leaned forward on the box in her excitement. 'Listen, Ben.' She slipped off the box and she knelt before him in the sand and assumed a pious expression. 'This is the way it goes every Sunday.'

Ben listened.

'Hail the Lord!

Yow Yow Yow Yow Yow.

Hail him again!

Yow Yow Yow Yow Yow.

Give him the works!

Yow Yow Yow Yow Yow.

Hail to gentle Jesus are you ready?

Let's go!

Ben shook his head sceptically. 'I don't think you got it quite right.'

'Oh, yes I have, Ben! That's just what it sounds like. I *know*

VERISIMILITUDE

it sounds like that, Ben. I *know* it. And that's not all, Ben!' She continued to kneel before him. 'Listen to this now, Ben, because after that it goes like this': She sang tunelessly in a mournful voice.

'Hail to gentle Jesus,
Oh how we hail Jesus,
When we hail him
He stays hailed.
Yow — Yow — Yow.'

'Well — ' said Ben, 'maybe it sounds like that to you, but I bet you got the words a little mixed up.'

'Oh, no I haven't, Ben! You go up there next Sunday and listen. They do it every Sunday. Yow, yow, yow!'

'I can see you never been to church,' said Ben. 'You sound sacrilegious.'

'What's that mean?' asked Virginia, returning to a seated posture on the box, and pulling her skirt down over her knees.

'It means un-god-like. It means you don't know about God.'

'Oh, yes I do. I know about God, Ben.'

'But your parents never taught you nothin' 'bout the Bible, did they?'

'But I believe in God just the same.'

'What's he look like?' asked Ben.

'Oh — he's — well, you know — *God*.'

'White whiskers?' asked Ben.

'Yes.'

'Golden throne?'

'Yes.'

'Way up on a cloud?'

'Yes — sort of up somewhere.'

'Big fat belly?'

'Yes — *no*! No. He's kind of big though. He's got light blue

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

eyes and kind of a long stick and a big voice like this, Ben' — speaking as basso as she could — 'I'm God. But he means well and he's kind of a nice old man.'

'Uh-huh,' agreed Ben. 'I kind of figured you'd think he was like that.'

'And he wears sandals — golden sandals.'

'Why?' asked Ben.

'They keep him from catching athlete's foot.'

'M'mm,' nodded Ben.

'And a white robe — he always wears a white robe.'

'And angels,' said Ben, 'there's always a lot of angels hangin' around him.'

'They play harps,' explained Virginia. 'He likes the sound of harps.'

'Yes indeedy, he'd rather hear a harp than the radio.'

'That's because he doesn't know any better. Wait'll he hears Charlie McCarthy and Uncle Boojum and the Green Hornet. He'll never go back to heaven after that. Then he'll take up the Lambeth Walk.'

'What's that?'

'It's a kind of dance or something. Doin' the Lambeth Walk — you know. Hoi!'

'Oh — jazz,' said Ben.

'No. Swing it,' said Virginia.

'Well, I don't know,' said Ben. 'He's pretty old for them dances. Like I am.'

'When he gets too old to go on godding he'll have to go to the old God's home,' said Virginia.

'But maybe he don't like the idea of going to the old God's home,' protested Ben. 'And if he don't like it, do you know what he'll do?'

'No — what'll he do, Ben?'

'He'll go on the road. Like me.'

VERISIMILITUDE

'Yes sirree, that's just what he'll do!' Virginia clapped her hands. 'Wouldn't it be funny if God came walking in here some day, Ben?'

'Sure would,' said Ben.

'He'd find a shack and he'd live in it, and the first thing you know he'd like it so much he'd forget all about heaven and angels and harps, wouldn't he, Ben?'

'Uh-huh,' said Ben, 'that's what you think. But s'pose I told you I had God all figured out a different way. S'pose I said God ain't an old man with white whiskers at all?'

'He's not?'

'No — he's not even got a white robe.'

'He hasn't?'

'No. That's just the way little boys and girls think about God. I reckon I thought that way onct, too. But you see, God is every place, all at onct.'

'How do you mean, Ben?'

'Well — there's a God in these-here scrub bushes.'

'There is!'

'Yes indeedy; and there's a God in every tree every place.'

'All trees?'

'All trees — all bushes — all rocks and animals and sand and earth. And here's somethin' else: even in you and me.'

'You mean — whatever I touch, that's where God is?'

'Somethin' like that.'

'How 'bout Wicky?'

'Him, too. All animals.'

'In Mother and Daddy?'

'Yep.'

'In *me*?'

'Yep.'

'What part of me? Where? How is it?'

'I can't explain it very well. You kinda got to *feel* it. You

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

got to *feel* God every place. Onct you get the feel of it, you know it. When you come right down to it, there ain't anything anywhere but God.'

'But look, Ben, that's my foot. Is it God, too?'

'Yep — now you're catchin' on.'

'But it's *my* foot, not God's foot.'

'Yes indeedy; it's your foot right enough. But it's God's, too. Everything is. You can't get away from God because there ain't nothin' nowhere but God.'

'How about bad things? God isn't in them, is he?'

'How do you mean?'

'Well — like black widow spiders. God couldn't be in them, could he?'

Ben laughed. 'That's a right good question. But let me tell you somethin'. Hard as it is to believe, in every single black widow spider, God is there, too.'

'Why is he, Ben? Why doesn't he say — zip! And there aren't any more black widow spiders.'

'No — he don't work that way. You see, if God is everything every place, that means God likes all things equal, because all things are part of God.'

'Even bad things?'

'Yep — cause to him there ain't no bad or good like we figure it out. He figures different.'

'Then why doesn't God see that you get enough to eat, Ben?'

'He does. It's like this: well — hold on now — you wanta hear more about this?'

'Yes!'

'Cause it's gettin' late.'

'Tell me some more, Ben. I'll go in one minute.'

'Well — just so you can sort of catch on better, look at it this-here way: When your stomach wants to eat, your hand picks up somethin' — bread, maybe —'

'Chocolate cake!'

'Your hand picks up a piece of chocolate cake and puts it in your mouth and your teeth chew it and you swallow it and your stomach gets filled up. Now none of those things really know what they're doin'.'

'They don't!'

'No. Your hand don't know nothin', does it?'

'No.'

'Or your teeth?'

'No.'

'Or your throat?'

'No.'

'But their God, which is you, and is all of 'em at once, that *you* knows what it is doin'. Hand don't know; teeth don't know; throat don't know; stomach don't know — only *you* know what you're doin'. God works the world somethin' the same way. A little girl called Virginia was the hand that picked up the chocolate cake — only God made it a jar of meat and a can of soup. That trail down the cliff was the throat. I'm the stomach. God made it work that way just like you make it work when you eat a piece of chocolate cake. In that way we're all part of God and he knows what he's doin'.'

'That's a funny way to think about it, Ben.'

'Makes sense if you let it.'

'Does God ever make a mistake and forget to do it right?'

'Nope — never.'

'But suppose I didn't bring the meat?'

'But you did.'

'I know, Ben, but *suppose* I didn't?'

'You couldn't help bringing it.'

'Then God never makes a mistake?'

'Never. If we think he's made a mistake it's just because we're too little and we can't see the whole thing the way he

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

sees it in his mind. Why, look here, suppose you was starvin' to death on a desert island and the only thing to eat was somethin' you don't like the taste of.'

'Onions.'

'All right, your mouth hates onions. And all of a sudden your mouth has to eat onions. Well, maybe your mouth gets mad and says "Virginia made a mistake puttin' those awful onions in me!" But that's only because your mouth wasn't able to know all the facts. Your mouth blames you for feedin' it onions, but it never understands that on that desert island you had to eat onions or die. Now we're just the same when we blame God for somethin' that seems to us like a mistake on his part. If we knowed what he knowed, we'd shut up. Can you understand that?'

'Yes — I can, Ben.'

'So we can't never say anything about God makin' a mistake. He just don't.'

'How about the time Mother was out and I ate a whole pound of candy in one afternoon?'

'Was you sick from it?'

'Oh, *awful* sick, Ben!'

'Well, then it wasn't no mistake on God's part.'

'Why wasn't it?'

'He was just fixin' it so you wouldn't eat a whole pound of candy again. You ain't, have you?'

'No.'

'Well — you see?'

'Huh,' said Virginia.

'You can't lick God,' said Ben. 'There just ain't no way. But I know one thing. You better walk up that trail cause it's beginnin' to get dark and maybe you'll get a spankin' when you get home.'

'Why, I've never been spanked, Ben,' said Virginia, testily.

'You ain't?'

'Why, no! Mother says she doesn't believe in it. It's too old fashioned.'

'Well, well,' said Ben. 'No religion, no spankin'. Well, well.'

Virginia stood up, bending forward and examining her knees and brushing sand from them. 'I'm being raised just as if I was grown up. They reason with me.'

'I've heard of bringin' up children like that,' said Ben, 'but I don't know —'

'It's scientific,' said Virginia. 'I know where babies come from. Do you?'

'The stork,' said Ben quickly.

'No. A sperm goes into an egg and makes a baby.'

Ben looked amazed.

'It grows in the womb and after nine months it gets born. Mother showed me.'

'Well!' said Ben, dumbfounded.

'All children should be told that, Mother says, just as soon as they want to know. Not everybody knows it though. Claire Ensley didn't until I told her.'

Their attention was attracted by voices coming along the trail. In a moment Heavy and Tex came into view. Heavy had a package and Tex had his pockets stuffed. They stared at Ben and Virginia as they walked on north into the denser chaparral. Nobody spoke, and in a moment they were gone again.

'They have been out gettin' their supper,' Ben explained.

'I have to go have mine, too,' said Virginia. 'Good night, Ben. Good night, Wicky. See you Monday.'

'Good night,' said Ben.

'Remember your promise,' Virginia called back.

'What promise?'

'Don't shave.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Oh — no indeedy, I won't,' smiled Ben.

An instant later the navy blue skirt and the white blouse disappeared in the bushes and Ben sat alone, fondling the rat and musing upon the strange children of the world of to-day.

'Well, well,' he said at last. 'When I was a kid it used to be the stork. Now it's the sperm.' He scratched his head. 'The sperm?'

Then he got up and went into his shack. There was a third of a jar of chipped beef left and a can of soup to be added to his slowly growing larder. He took inventory: becf, can of soup, can of corn, can of tomatoes, loaf of bread. The Lord provides. Yes indeedy.

The next day was Friday, and before noon Heavy came to Ben's shack. 'Look here,' he said, 'what's that little girl comin' down here for?'

'She wasn't here to-day,' said Ben, 'and she won't be here tomorrow because she's goin' away with her parents some place for the week-end.'

'You better chase her home next time,' said Heavy. 'We don't want her comin' around here.'

'Well —' said Ben, doubtfully.

'Sec?' said Heavy.

'She lives right up there on the bluff,' explained Ben.

'I know it, and she's got to stay there, see?'

'Yes,' said Ben. 'She's comin' down Monday, though. After school.'

'How do you know?'

'She said so,' explained Ben.

'What d'y'wanta do — ruin this place?' asked Heavy. 'Little girls runnin' around loose — Jesus.'

'Well —' said Ben.

'Nix on the kid stuff,' declared Heavy. 'Understand?'

Ben walked into his shack and came out almost immediately.

VERISIMILITUDE

'Have a can of corn,' he said to Heavy. Heavy took it and looked at the label. He threw a glance up toward the arroyo top, and then looked at the can of corn again. He handled it as if it might be a high explosive. 'Huh,' he grunted.

Ben sighed.

Heavy frowned and turned the can of corn over in his large dirty hands. 'What else you got?'

'Monday,' Ben said.

'Well, I'll be damned,' said Heavy. He gave it a little more thought. The frown on his face slowly relaxed to a grin. 'Watch your step, that's all. Little girls is dynamite.' Then he walked north through the chaparral to his own shack, carrying the can of corn with him.

CHAPTER IV

HAVE

I

FOR three days Virginia lived in the world she had always known. It was interesting enough because she was taking a trip with Mother and Daddy, and with Mr. and Mrs. Harmon who were Mother and Daddy's guests. They went up the coast to Monterey and they didn't come home until Sunday night. Daddy drove the Cadillac and Mr. Harmon sat in front with him, while she and Mother and Mrs. Harmon sat in the rear. If you looked straight ahead about all you could see was the back of Daddy's neck and the back of Mr. Harmon's neck. Daddy's hair was trimmed evenly around the back, but Mr. Harmon's neck didn't have any hair because his head didn't have any either. His head was round and shiny and there were three rolls of fat so that it was hard to make out the exact spot where neck ended and head began. But if you studied it carefully you could just tell about what was head and what was neck. Mr. Harmon smoked cigars all the time and there was a constant smell of cigar smoke in the car. Daddy didn't seem to mind the smoke but once in a while it made Mother cough.

Both Mother and Daddy were pleased to have Virginia with them and Mother explained to Mrs. Harmon that they were not the kind of parents who 'abandoned their child to her own devices'.

'I think that is so wise,' said Mrs. Harmon.

'Virginia is quite a little lady and Edward and I feel we can take her anywhere we go,' explained Mother. 'We've always

told her everything and never kept anything from her.' And to Virginia she added, 'We never keep any secrets from each other, do we, sweet?'

'Oh, look, Mother, are they bulls?' asked Virginia quickly.

'Steers,' said Daddy from the front seat.

'Going to be juicy steaks,' said Mr. Harmon.

'So our little girl is never treated like a child,' continued Mother.

They were riding along near Paso Robles at the time, and Virginia, sitting next to Mother, stared out the window at the rolling hills because she didn't like to be talked about in front of people, especially when you were all three together in the back seat of a car and it made the whole thing so — so — what? — well, like being watched when you were doing something that you did in private and shouldn't be watched when you were doing. So she looked out the window in order not to see Mrs. Harmon (who immediately said, 'Oh, yes, little Virginia is really a sweet young lady' — how sickening grown-ups could be) and wondered just what it meant to be abandoned to your own devices. If it meant playing in the arroyo bottom she really liked being abandoned. She considered the phrase but asked no questions about it.

The big hotel called Del Monte was a lovely place in which to stay, and it was fun to explore the gardens and trails and to ride over the seventeen mile drive and play on the beach with Mother and Mrs. Harmon. On Saturday Daddy and Mr. Harmon played golf most of the day on what they called the 'sporting' Pebble Beach course. They seemed to mean that it was more difficult than El Encanto course at home. But Daddy went out in a seventy-six and came back in seventy-five, leaving Ralph four down, and was mighty pleased about it, whatever that might mean. Then there was Carmel. That was a funny little place and she really liked that better than Monterey, but Mother said that

one just didn't go to Carmel to *stay* — only to *look* — and Daddy said, 'The atmosphere is too damned arty for me' when he didn't know Virginia was listening. This made Mr. Harmon laugh and he said the meaningless words, 'If a man doesn't know how to support himself he can always starve in a garret and call it art, eh, Ed?' And Daddy said, 'All this modern art is just so much rubbish. But there's one chap among them who has really got something. He paints intelligently and he's got Iowa from one end to the other — this chap Grant Wood.'

'Oh, yes,' said Mr. Harmon, 'he's a real American painter.'

Virginia made a mental note of the conversation. Art, arty, artest — Iowa from one end to the other — American painter. Arty. Funny word. Why was this Carmel place arty? It reminded her of Mr. Arty Choke. She'd almost forgotten that joke. She must tell it to Ben.

I forgot the joke
About Mr. Arty Choke.

And now, Saturday afternoon at sunset, she knew just how it would be getting dark in the arroyo and how Ben would put Wicky in his cage, and perhaps one or two of those others would pass by on the trail. Such funny names they had — Tex, and Gosh, and the big one she had seen only once or twice called Heavy — they would all be coming home about this time. And she could sit there in the big hotel lounge and think about things like that happening more than three hundred miles down south, think about them in that place-where-you-were-alone no matter who was around or where she was, while Mother and Daddy drank cocktails with Mr. and Mrs. Harmon and she had an orangeade.

On the drive north and again on the drive home they passed hitch-hikers from time to time and they reminded Virginia of Ben. Some of them looked pretty dirty but some of them were

all right. The Cadillac whizzed past all of them without any recognition.

Mrs. Harmon finally made a comment. 'Just look at that poor old man,' she said. 'Probably everything he owns is tied on his back. And there he goes plodding on in the hot sun.'

'And after all,' sighed Mother, 'I suppose he's human.'

(So they were talking about old men who walked on the highway, were they. Well, she knew an old man who used to do that, but now he had a nice home in the arroyo bottom. Probably the old man they had passed didn't have a pet rat, and probably his name wasn't Ben, either. But he must have *some* name.)

'I wonder if he's got a monicker,' said Virginia.

'A *what?*' asked Mother.

'A monicker.'

'Why, I never heard you use that word before,' said Mother. 'Where did you hear it?'

'Oh — I don't know,' said Virginia.

Then Mother laughed. But it wasn't a real laugh. It was the kind Mother used when she was obliged to laugh at something she didn't think was funny. 'You know,' she said to Mrs. Harmon, who had smiled politely, 'Edward and I send her to public school. We try to be liberal, and sometimes private schools turn out such little snobs. But I don't know if we can keep it up. Some of the *language* she picks up —'

'It's the times,' said Mrs. Harmon. 'I was reading a novel the other day — I can't think of the title of it now — but it was *very* well reviewed — and it simply wasn't fit to be in print. Of course it was about the masses, but even so, if we allow vile stuff to be printed, we must expect our children to pick it up. I really think, Margaret, if Ralph and I had a child we'd send her to a private school.'

Two more hitch-hikers were standing on the shoulder of the highway. As the car sped toward them and they saw that it was

full, they gave up jerking their thumbs and stared at it as it passed by. Nothing was said about them but a few miles farther on they passed a man and a woman. The man half-heartedly solicited a ride and then gave up, but the woman sat on a suitcase beside the road and didn't even look up.

Mr. Harmon looked back at her. 'You hear of some pitiful cases these days,' he said.

'You do indeed,' Daddy said.

'Remember Gagus?' asked Mr. Harmon.

'Oh, yes,' said Daddy.

'Well, this is confidential, but my attorney told me a story about him that shocked me. Do you know that all that man has left is thirty thousand dollars in government bonds and a ranch in California and a ranch in Arizona?'

'T'ch, t'ch,' said Daddy.

'I said, "Get him to a hospital",' continued Mr. Harmon. '“That's the only thing to do — get him to a hospital”.'

'And what have we to face in the future?' asked Daddy. 'Where's the way out? National debt climbing. Unemployment climbing.'

'The greatest cancer in the heart of this country to-day,' said Mr. Harmon, 'can be described in one word — relief.'

'I agree,' said Daddy.

'It breaks down the morale of the nation,' said Mr. Harmon. 'All this W.P.A. and P.W.A. and C.C.C. — call that American? Why I know of ranch hands who deliberately quit picking cotton in order to go on relief. And the ranch was paying them twenty cents an hour, too. They wanted twenty-seven and a half or they wouldn't work. Now I can pay my pickers twenty-seven and a half and operate at a little profit, or I can afford to take a little loss — but I can't let down the associated growers who'd be sure to operate at a loss and then there wouldn't be any work for anybody. No — I'd plough my cotton under before I'd let the

mass tell me how to run *my* ranch. But if there weren't all this relief they'd *have* to work for twenty cents an hour.'

'The trouble is,' said Daddy, 'they don't want to work.'

'There you've got it,' said Mr. Harmon. 'All these men we see on the highway — they wouldn't work if you offered them jobs. All they want to do is to get to a government camp and stay there. First a few — then hundreds — then thousands. And every one has a vote, don't forget. Close to ten million of the proletariat now trades its votes for bread. And our income tax pays for *that*!'

The back of Mr. Harmon's neck was getting red, and one of the three rolls of fat twitched.

'I shudder to think how the administration has made use of the mass,' said Daddy.

'M'mm,' said Mr. Harmon, blowing a cloud of cigar smoke.

'Where's the end of it?' said Daddy. 'That's what worries me.'

'Well — the American standard of living is too high,' said Mr. Harmon. 'A worker expects to have an automobile and a radio and send his kids to college. It's ridiculous. We've educated our mass to live beyond its means. Look at the dictator countries: you don't hear of any strikes and labour troubles there. Why? Because the standard of living is lower. The mass doesn't expect anything more. But in this country a man doesn't want to pick cotton unless he tells *you* how much *you* have to pay him.'

Two of the rolls of fat were twitching now. If Mr. Harmon would just go on talking all three of them would twitch at once. It was interesting to watch.

Then Mother said, 'But what's in the future, Ralph? Where is America drifting?'

'Why, Margaret,' said Mr. Harmon, turning in his seat so that it was hard to see the three rolls of fat at the back of his neck (but maybe he'll turn back again in a minute. Just watch), 'Margaret

— we who are still politically sane — ’ then he coughed his long racking cough, choked over his cigar, and said, ‘H’rumph’.

‘Yes,’ said Daddy.

‘People who are in the position that we’re in,’ said Mr. Harmon, ‘must face this issue squarely. Now, right now I admit I’ve been barking up the wrong tree. That is, villifying the obvious mistakes of the New Deal won’t help us now. It’s too late. The damage has been done. The worker has tasted relief. He’s never going to let go of it.’

‘Horrible thought,’ said Daddy.

‘Men like your husband and me,’ said Mr. Harmon, screwing farther around in the front seat so that you couldn’t see the back of his neck any more at all — but his face was still flushed so the back of his neck must still be red — ‘are going to have to fight this administration with its own medicine. If Roosevelt gives ’em bread for their votes, we’ve got to go him one better and find some way to give ’em cake.’

(Mr. Harmon didn’t say what kind. Chocolate, maybe. Or all kinds, maybe.)

‘Expensive, though,’ said Daddy.

‘Edward, my boy,’ said Mr. Harmon, ‘many a man believes he’s eating cake just because he’s *told* that it is cake.’

(You could see a corner of one roll of fat now — and it was twitching.)

‘Ah,’ said Daddy.

‘I would certainly call myself a liberal,’ declared Mr. Harmon, ‘but — ’

(Liberal. It’s a nice word. I’m a liberal.)

‘I believe in moderation in all things. Now if our ultimate end is to preserve the God-given liberties of our Constitution for the good of the common man — and I even include the hitch-hiker on the highway — ’

‘Yes,’ said Daddy.

'If the Republican ideology is to be preserved for the good of mankind —'

(What a big word — 'i-de-ol-o-gy' — it was getting hard to understand now.)

'... then I say, at the risk of being called Machiavellian —'

(Good night! Machia — what in the world was that?)

'... the end justifies the means. And if we've got to tell 'em it's cake, and make 'em think it's cake, then by God it is our *duty* to practise a subterfuge —'

(Sub-ter-fuge?)

'... for the ultimate good of the worker, the proletariat, the man on the street; for the ultimate status quo of capital and labour, for the preservation of state's rights, liberty, justice, and the tried and true American way.'

(All three rolls twitched! Hooray!)

Mother interrupted by saying, 'Oh, Ralph, that's splendid!'

'It's clear seeing,' agreed Daddy.

'Ralph practically said the very same things in his speech at the Ambassador last week,' said Mrs. Harmon, 'and they all applauded.'

'Oh, I softened it there a bit,' said Mr. Harmon. 'But we can speak frankly here, and I know personally, and it's known in Washington, that we face an issue in which it is sink or swim. I may not be an Olympic swimmer, but I certainly prefer to keep my head above the dangerous rip-tides of socialism, communism, bolshevism, and all the backwash that goes with such un-American practices.'

It was a serious moment. All four of the grown-ups got into the conversation and it became hard to follow all of it. Front seat, back seat, and then you listened to something in the front seat and got confused about what they were saying in the back seat and you came out of it all with the general feeling that Mr. Harmon was saying awfully important things, but they were so

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

important you couldn't understand all the words. And finally you let the talk go on without making any effort to listen to it, and you went into that place where you were. You and nobody could tell what you were thinking and you sat still and wondered what Ben and Wicky were up to now that it was Sunday afternoon.

It was after eleven o'clock at night before they reached Pasadena, and Virginia was tired and almost went to sleep in the car. But before they could go home they had to take Mr. and Mrs. Harmon home first and they lived in the near-by community of San Marino in a house twice as big as Daddy's with twice as much ground around it. But there was no arroyo near the Harmon's house and Virginia wouldn't have traded it for her own. Then there was the usual delay while the Harmon's bags were taken out of the trunk of the car and everybody told everybody what a wonderful time it had been and Mr. Harmon wanted Mother and Daddy to come in for a night-cap (which was ridiculous and was probably a joke of some kind) and Mother and Daddy said they had to go right home because Virginia was tired. She protested through a yawn that she wasn't a bit tired and Mrs. Harmon kissed her (a nasty wet experience) and Mr. Harmon patted her head and said she was a great little traveller and she could go anywhere with him any time, and finally it all came to an end and she and Mother and Daddy were driving out of the Harmon place and across Pasadena to their own home.

They came to Colorado Street and drove through the business section and Mother and Daddy hadn't said a word. Virginia had the back seat to herself now as Mother was riding in front with Daddy.

'Well?' said Mother, and there was that curious tone in it that you sometimes heard in Mother's voice when she and Daddy talked just as if Virginia were not present.

'He's tight as a clam,' said Daddy.

(Who? Mr. Harmon?)

'What did you expect?' asked Mother.

'Lots of platitudes,' said Daddy, 'a few aphorisms —'

(Lots of what? A few what?)

'... but he's not talking if he can help it.'

Well, that was true, Mr. Harmon was a kind of quiet man. He had hardly talked to her on the whole trip. About the only thing she could remember now that he had said to her was, 'Do you know why little pigs eat so much?' And when she had said 'No', Mr. Harmon said, 'Because they want to make hogs of themselves'. Then he had made a kind of funny face by pursing his lips and squinting his eyes and had patted her on the head. Now a man who couldn't think of anything more than that to say over a whole week-end wasn't talking if he could help it. Daddy was right.

'That bit about cake,' said Mother. 'There you've got it.'

'Yes — and then again no,' said Daddy. 'I had the feeling he was sounding me instead of vice versa.'

'What for?' asked Mother. 'Why should he take the trouble?'

'Your guess is as good as mine.'

'She asked me if we would be their guests at Ensenada.'

'What did you say?'

'I said we'd be delighted, of course.'

'When?'

'She didn't say, but I gathered that it ...' the conversation trailed away and suddenly Virginia woke up. She had been asleep on the back seat and Daddy was smiling at her and lifting her out of the car.

'My poor little chickadee,' Mother said. 'Such a long trip.'

'I'm not sleepy,' said Virginia, as Mother took her by the hand and led her into the house.

'You go right upstairs and take your clothes off and Mother will be right up.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

Virginia went up the stairs, one at a time for a change, and once in her room began automatically to undress. In a few minutes Mother came up and tucked her into bed and she was asleep before Mother could turn off the light.

II

On Monday it was school again but on Monday afternoon it was the arroyo. She skipped home along Palm Drive and entered the house by her accustomed route, the back door. There was something to be done to-day that was especially exciting.

'Hello, Celia!' she chirped as she hurried through the kitchen. She leaped the stairs, tossed two school books into her room, and went at once to Daddy's bathroom. It was necessary to stand on a chair in order to reach the top shelf of the medicine closet, and there was a black box containing a beautiful razor and all the funny things gentlemen used in shaving. There was time for only one admiring glance at the contents. She snapped the box shut, climbed down from the chair, gave a quick look around to be sure that nothing had been unduly disturbed, and hurried downstairs. It would never do to have Celia see the black box and it was too big to stuff inside your dress, so she avoided any difficulty by leaving the house by the front door. Then it was an easy matter to scoot by the kitchen in a hurry, through the garden, over the hedge, and down the trail. At the bottom she almost bumped into Heavy who was coming out of the chaparral. She hesitated, and then said, 'Hello'.

'What you got there?' asked Heavy.

'This? — Oh, something for Ben.' She half concealed the box behind her.

Heavy shook his head sceptically. 'You'll get us all hung yet,' he said. 'I seen it happen before.'

'What?' asked Virginia, utterly perplexed.

'You're dynamite,' said Heavy. 'I ain't foolin' with it and I ain't gonna be around when it blows up. Little girls runnin' around loose — whew!' He snorted in disgust and marched on.

Virginia watched him go. What a funny one. When he talked it didn't make any sense. Oh, well, he didn't matter. He wasn't anything like Ben. She skipped through the chaparral and there was Ben, sitting in the sunlight, the broken chair tipped back against his shack. And there was Wicky in his cage beside Ben.

'Well — well!' smiled Ben. 'Here comes Virginia!' He was genuinely pleased to see her, and that was nice because she was happy to see him, too. She thought how much nicer he was than Mr. Harmon. He had kept his promise and not shaved, and now he needed a shave terribly.

'Ben! Guess what I brought you this time!' She kept the box behind her back.

'H'mm,' meditated Ben. He sniffed the air and stared up at the sky. 'Roast duck,' he said finally.

'No! No! It's something you need terribly!'

'Let'see — ' he racked his brain. 'Can't think of nothin' I need very much.'

'Try hard, Ben!'

'Well — I ain't got a stove-pipe hat.'

'No, it's not a stove-pipe hat. What *is* a stove-pipe hat?'

'One of them operry hats.'

'One more guess is all you can have.'

'Is it animal or vegetable?' asked Ben.

'Neither one! It's hard and yellow.'

'Oh, sure,' said Ben, 'now I got it. It's a sack of gold!'

'No! Look, Ben!'

Virginia brought the black box from behind her back and raised the lid. She put it on Ben's knees and he examined the contents in detail.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Well, well, well — goodness me,' he said with acted appreciation. 'Ain't that just too pretty for words. My — my —'

'That's soap,' explained Virginia. 'That's a thing in case you cut yourself. That's the handle and it screws on there, and the blade goes in there. Maybe it's gold — I don't know. Anyway, it looks like gold. That's toilet water in the little bottle and it makes you smell nice.'

'Well, now see here,' said Ben, doubtfully, 'ain't your Daddy goin' to wonder where —'

'These are blades,' explained Virginia. 'Now I'll show you how they work. You put one over these little sticky-up things, see? And then you screw the handle on tight and you're ready to shave. How do you like it, Ben?'

'Why, I think it's just fine and dandy,' said Ben. 'Just fine and dandy, but what I'm wonderin' is, what's your Daddy goin' to think when he starts lookin' for —'

'Oh, he'll never miss it,' declared Virginia. 'He hasn't used it for weeks — not for months. Wasn't it nice of me to bring it? Aren't you surprised?'

'Well, surprised ain't half the word,' said Ben.

'Oh, goody, goody! I'm glad!'

'A nice fancy razor set is a thing I've always been wantin' all my life and —'

'And now you've got one!'

'Yes indeedy.'

'When are you going to use it?'

'Oh, well — there ain't no hurry, so I —'

'Yes, there is! Use it now, Ben! I want to see you shave with it. I know! Let's have a barber shop, shall we?'

'Takes warm water to shave,' said Ben. 'And —'

'Let's heat some.'

'And I ain't got a fire goin' now.'

'Maybe we could shave Wicky.'

'Oh, no indeedy. Wicky wouldn't like that at all.'

'No, I suppose he wouldn't.'

'He's got to have them whiskers of his. If he shaved 'em off he'd be unhappy.'

'Then what'll we do, Ben?'

'I tell you what — let's just look at this pretty razor set to-day, and to-morrow I'll use it. No use dirtyin' it up straight off. Let's wait'll you come next time. Won't that be nice?'

'Well — all right,' agreed Virginia. 'I can put some toilet water on you, though!'

'Well — ' objected Ben.

Virginia unscrewed the bottle. 'This isn't right,' she explained. 'You're supposed to do it *after* you shave, but once won't hurt. Raise your chin up.'

'Like this?'

'Higher. There. Now hold still.'

Ben winced as the liquid ran down his neck and around his shirt collar. 'That's enough! That's enough,' he insisted.

'It's got to be rubbed in,' said Virginia. 'Rub it in hard. Doesn't it smell nice?'

'Well — ' said Ben. He rubbed his chin gingerly. Virginia handed him the bottle and stepped back and surveyed him with a critical eye.

'I can smell it this far away,' she vouchsafed. 'It's gentleman smell.'

Heavy came along the trail. He marched up to Ben's shack and looked at Ben with the shaving set on his knees and the bottle of toilet water in his hand. He sniffed. 'Oh, my God,' he said. 'Stink-sweet.' He gave Virginia a look and sighed 'Phew', and marched on to his own shack.

'He's an awfully funny fellow, isn't he,' said Virginia.

'Well, yes and no,' said Ben.

'He's not really a gentleman,' said Virginia, 'the way you are.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

They wouldn't let him in the hotel at Monterey — not the way he acts.'

'So you been to Monterey,' said Ben, incredulously.

'Yes, have you ever been there, Ben?'

'No, but I know where you mean,' said Ben. 'Why it would take me a week or two to get all the way up there. You sure do get around.'

'Daddy didn't drive fast either. He didn't want to get a ticket because Mr. Harmon was with him.'

'Uh-huh,' said Ben, returning the toilet water to the shaving set.

'Mother and Daddy are on their best behaviour when Mr. and Mrs. Harmon are around.'

(That was funny. She hadn't thought of that before. Yet it was true. Mother and Daddy had acted just as you act when you're on your best behaviour.)

'Why did they do that, Ben, do you know?'

'No,' said Ben. 'I wouldn't know.'

'But that's just what they did. We're all going to Ensenada, too.'

'Maybe this-here Mr. Harmon is your daddy's boss,' said Ben.

'Oh, no. Daddy says he'll never take orders from anybody.'

'Is Mr. Harmon rich?'

'Yes, he's quite rich.'

'Is he old?'

'Yes — he's old and fat and bald-headed. Mother and Daddy are wondering now if the Harmons were worth the expense. And Mother said, "At least we never have to get into that awful married thing that the Harmons are in". What did she mean by that, Ben?'

Ben considered before he spoke. 'Well, she must have meant something,' he admitted.

'It must be funny to be married.'

'Most everybody does it, though,' said Ben.

'Why do people do it?'

'It's a social custom of sorts,' explained Ben.

'But you're not married.'

'No — but once I was.'

'You were?' Virginia was amazed. 'You were married to a wife?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Why, Ben, I never knew you were married. Where's Mrs. Ben?'

'They came and took her away.'

'Who did?'

'The authorities.'

'You mean they arrested her?'

'Well — not exactly,' said Ben.

'When was this?'

'Oh, years ago — years and years ago. I can still see it all just as plain, though.'

'Where was it?'

'Well — it was in Pennsylvania in the summer time, and I was livin' on the outskirts of a town and there was a great big house like a hospital or something over on the hill. One evenin' when I come home to my little house — somethin' like this-here shack it was, only bigger — once it had been an old chicken house but I fixed it up nice — so one evenin' when I come home who should I see but a right attractive-lookin' woman busyin' herself around my house just like it was hers. I says, "Hello", and she says, "I'm Mary Sunshine" and I says "Think of that", and she says, "I'm cookin' supper". And she was, too, but she was havin' a little trouble gettin' the fire to burn nice and I poked my head in the house and come out again, and when I come out I'll be switched if she hadn't yanked off her dress — a kind of grey uniform-like thing it was — and she throwed that dress in

the fire and right away the fire began to burn nice, but she didn't have a stitch of clothes on her.'

'Why, Ben!' Virginia went into squeals of laughter.

'I tried to give her some old clothes but she wouldn't have 'em, so pretty soon we et supper. Well, there warn't nothin' to do but ast her to stay in my house so that's how I met Mary Sunshine and she come to be my wife.'

'Did you buy her a new dress?'

'Well — no — not exactly. She never ast for one. She never ast for nothin'. She never even ast any questions at all, but just busied herself about that house and run it in apple pie order and swept it and cooked three meals a day. And if I was gone for an hour or all day it never made no difference to her at all, she just went about her business and looked after things and —'

'Without any clothes on?' asked Virginia.

'Well, yes, most of the time she didn't like to wear anything. It was one of her peculiarities, sort of. Anyway, it was summer time. But she was a splendid woman in most every way a man could want and she lived there with me six days and we got along just fine and dandy. She had a wonderful disposition — just wonderful. And she had fine ideas, too, like bein' a angel and all.'

'An angel?'

'Yeah — she figgered she was in the process of becomin' a angel and her wings was growin'. That was the only question she ever ast me — whether her wings had growed any appreciable amount or not. She'd ast me that all the time.'

'And did they?'

'Well, I'd examine her back and I couldn't see no wings, but she said they was there, and she was so set on it that I guess maybe they was. So maybe by this time Mary Sunshine's flyin' around some place and if so I hope she flies out here. She'd take to this. Oh, she'd like this place. Why them six days she lived with me was the finest six days of my life.'

'What happened on the seventh day, Ben?'

'Then on the seventh day a couple of deputy sheriffs with shot-guns come around and took her away.'

'Why? What for?'

'Well, it seems she had got out of the hospital-like building over on the hill and they wanted to take her back there. It was a kind of county bughouse and they kept Mary Sunshine there because they didn't know what else to do with her. While she was livin' with me they had been lookin' high and wide for her and there she was all the time right under their nose. She put up a big fuss but they toted her off just the same and put her in solitary and I never seen her again.'

'Oh, that was too bad! I feel sorry for Mary Sunshine. I bet you missed her.'

'I missed her for quite a spell and in the town dump I found a busted alarm clock called "Sunbeam". I fixed it up and it run and it made me think of her. By rights it shoulda been called Sunshine but Sunbeam was near enough. When it got cold I went south and the day I left I looked across at the bughouse on the hill and I couldn't help wonderin' what Mary Sunshine was doin' in there.'

'Maybe she could look out and see you!'

'I don't know. When I get to thinkin' about it now I see that all that was wrong with Mary Sunshine was that she was ahead of her time. Nowadays there's nudist camps and people don't think nothin' of it. She wasn't crazy at all — she was a kind of pioneer. Why, she wasn't no more fit to be put in a bughouse than you or I are. It was a shame, that's what it was. But it just goes to show.'

'What's it show, Ben?'

'Why, it goes to show up human nature. The public never knows its great leaders until it's too late. They laughed at Columbus, didn't they?'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Uh-huh. Some people thought he was crazy.'

'Well — there you are. They laughed at Fulton's steamboat. They said Edison didn't have sense enough to come in out of the rain. They said Lindbergh couldn't fly to Paris. And they went and locked up a foremost advanced woman like Mary Sunshine. It just goes to show.'

'Maybe they let her out by this time, Ben.'

'Don't know. But I do know that I never found *another* woman like Mary Sunshine, or one half as good, so I never got married again. And that was over thirty years ago, too. She was certainly a splendid woman.'

'I think that was right not to get married again. I wouldn't either.'

'A real considerate woman like Mary Sunshine just sets a man off. A marriage like that is a fine thing for any man.'

'What's fine about it?'

'Oh, gettin' up in the mornin' and figurin' there was somebody goin' through the day with you who wouldn't ast no questions and who would be waitin' for you to come home and who was your helpmeet.'

'Your *what*?'

'Helpmeet.'

'Oh.'

'Two is stronger than one. When a man gets married he can do a lot of things he wouldn't of thought he coulda done if he wasn't. When they come and took her away it changed my whole life.'

'Do wives feel that way, too?'

'I reckon so. It's somethin' like two people becomin' one and workin' together like one person. You ain't got no secrets from each other.'

'Oh, but I *love* secrets. You're *my* secret. Nobody knows about you. If I had a husband I wouldn't let him know about

you. I'd keep you in that place-where-I'm-alone. Do you think I'll ever get married, Ben?

'Oh, yes indeedy.'

'I'm not sure I'd like it. What will my husband be like?'

'Oh, you'll fall in love with some smart young feller along about ten or twelve years from now and you'll think he's the most wonderful thing on earth.'

'I will?'

'Uh-huh, and he'll be so in love with you that he won't know if he's comin' or goin'. He's a little boy out flyin' a kite somewhere now, but when you meet him you'll know him.'

'How'll I know him?'

'You just will. That's how things are.'

Virginia thought it over. It was true, she had seen boys flying kites from time to time, but she had never looked at them critically. The next time she saw a boy flying a kite she'd pay close attention.

'Ben — if I got married, would I have to give up the place-where-I'm-alone?'

'Now, let's see,' mused Ben. 'I ain't quite sure how you mean.'

'Well, it's like this,' she sat down cross-legged in the sand in front of Ben. 'I have one place where I'm alone. Nobody knows it. Not a single solitary person. I've never even told Mother or Daddy. But there's a *place*. Do you know what I mean?'

'Maybe so.'

'I can always go there any time at all. When we were away and they were all talking I could go into that place-where-I'm-alone and think of you here in the arroyo. And nobody knew what I was doing or thinking or anything. Do you have a place like that?'

'Oh, yes — yes indeedy.'

'Does everybody?'

'I reckon.'

'What is it like to you, Ben?'

'Well, let'see.' Ben tipped back and forth on the broken chair. 'I can think what I want, and decide what I want, and pick up and light out any time I choose, and nobody can't tell nothin' about me.'

'That's it, Ben! I'm the same way. Tell me some more!'

'And in that place-where-I'm-alone there ain't nobody else.'

'Yes — yes!'

'It's the one place that is all mine because all me is it.'

'Oh, Ben — that's just like me!'

'Uh-huh.'

'Do animals have a place like that? Does Wicky?'

'No —' Ben considered. 'I kinda doubt it. I reckon it is somethin' that comes with bein' human. I reckon it is somethin' that all children are on to.'

'But you're not a child.'

'Now that's right. It must be somethin' I remembered for sixty years.'

'I'm glad. I can have it all my life, too.'

'In a way,' said Ben, 'that's all there is.'

'That place?'

'In a way.'

'Why?'

'Well — all that outside of you, them-there bushes and that sand you're settin' on, and the sky, and even me, all that ain't really real.'

'Oh, yes it is. You're real, Ben.'

'Only because you think so,' said Ben. 'Only what you think is real. And what you think is in that place-where-you're-alone. So there ain't nothin' real except that place-where-you're-alone. That's all there is.'

'But, Ben, once you said everything out there was God — bushes and trees and even black widow spiders.'

'T'is.'

'Now you say bushes and trees and black widow spiders aren't real.'

'They ain't.'

'But, Ben, that doesn't make any sense.'

'That's because you think somethin' to be real has got to be solid. But there ain't nothin' more real than an idea and an idea ain't solid at all.'

'How about a big hunk of iron, so heavy you can't lift it. That's real, isn't it?'

'Nope.'

'Or an automobile — or a great big steam engine — or the whole Santa Fe Streamliner. That's real, isn't it?'

'Nope.'

'Why, Ben, how can you be so silly? You can touch those things and see that they're real.'

'Look a here,' said Ben, 'maybe this'll help you catch on: you know that there ain't no sound if there ain't a ear to listen to it with, don't you?'

'No.'

'Well, sound ain't nothin' you can touch, is it?'

'No.'

'And a deaf man don't know it if you shoot off a fire-cracker in back of him, does he?'

'No.'

'But *you* know it.'

'Yes.'

'Well, how do you know it?'

'Because I have ears to hear with.'

'That's right, so if there wasn't no cars on anybody in the world, there wouldn't be no sound anywhere in the world. And if there wasn't no eyes in the world there wouldn't be no colours in the world. And in just the same way it takes a mouth to taste

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

with and a hand to feel with and a nose to smell with. Everything that we think is real is the result of them five senses. It's because of his five senses that Wicky thinks he's livin' in a real world, and if just *one* of them senses don't work like he's used to it workin', why he ups and has a nervous breakdown. Humans is just the same. If humans could just catch on that everything they think is so important ain't even real except in their minds, they'd save a lot of worryin'. Look at me; I never have no nervous breakdowns. I won't take it into my head to jump off that-there Colorado Street bridge the way a lot of folks has done. Cause why? Cause I know that there ain't nothin' worth worryin' about because there ain't nothin' anyway.'

'Then what's the use of doing anything, Ben? What do I go to school for?'

'Oh, I don't mean,' said Ben, 'that everybody should just set around until they dry up and blow away. It's right to do things and keep doin' 'em, but at the same time a man has got to understand that nothin's worth really worryin' about. If it don't work out one way it'll work out another. If he gets to worryin' about it, he's takin' it too serious. If he gets to worryin' about maybe a big hunk of iron will be too heavy for him to lift, or that his wife has got put in the bughouse or that maybe he's gonna be late and miss the Streamliner, that shows he thinks them things is more real than he is. And he shouldn't think that because them things is only the result of his five senses, like I showed, and don't even exist 'ceptin' in his mind. So when you come right down to it there ain't nothin' but mind. Now that place-where-you're-alone is right smack in the middle of your mind and it's you and everythin' else in the world at once, because everythin' else is mind, too. Maybe that's kinda hard for Virginia to catch on to all at once. Is it?'

'Well, it doesn't make very much sense,' Virginia admitted.

'Then, when you got it clear that there ain't nothin' nowhere

H A V E

but mind,' continued Ben, 'you can easy see that all the mind there is everywhere is the mind of God, and you —'

'Oh, Ben, you've got the most wonderful eye!'

'I got two eyes.'

'But I'm only *seeing* one. It's deep green colour, and all around the edge your eyelashes are like thick dark grass. And right in the middle, in that black shining part, I can see me.'

Ben's eye
Is God
And I.

BenseyesGodnI. Say it fast.'

'Well, whatever my eye is, you, in that place-where-you're-alone, are just one little tiny part of God. Understand that?'

'BenseyesGodnI. Maybe Mr. Harmon could figure it out,' said Virginia. 'He's tight as a clam but when he talks he uses some of the biggest words.'

'No, I reckon Mr. Harmon ain't as close to it as you are. You just keep on usin' that place-where-you're-alone like you do and don't tell nobody about it and you'll learn a lot more'n me, cause you got a long way to go yet. I reckon maybe your parents is raisin' you all right after all. Anyways, if you don't get up the trail they'll be figurin' somebody kidnapped their little girl.'

'We haven't fed Wicky yet.'

'You fetch him out of his cage and I'll get some bread.'

Virginia opened the wire door and coaxed the rat to come to her hand. Ben went into his shack and came out with a crust of bread.

'Is that all he gets to-night?' asked Virginia.

'Rations gettin' low,' said Ben.

'I'll fix that,' said Virginia. 'Celia thinks she's going to have egg-plant to-morrow, but she's not.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'No?'

'No. I don't like egg-plant so I'm going to bring the whole thing down here. Here, Wicky — supper for Wicky. I think he understands me, Ben. Look how he acts.'

'Oh, sure he does. By rights he's half yours.'

'Can I call him my rat — to myself, I mean?'

'Yes indeedy.'

'I won't tell anybody, but I'd like to think of him as my rat part of the time.'

'He's half yours and half mine,' agreed Ben.

'I wrote a theme about him for English composition,' explained Virginia, 'and I called it The Pet Rat even though he wasn't really my rat then. I wrote all about him and I put you in it and the teacher said it was quite original and I got an A.'

'That's good,' said Ben. 'I used to get A's right along when I went to school.'

'Did you, Ben?'

'Yes indeedy. One time I knowed so much more'n the teacher that was teachin' me that I skipped a whole grade.'

'Gee! You *were* smart!'

'Then I begun skippin' grade after grade and day after day until I had went through the whole education there was and come around again right to where I started from. So I never had to go to school no more after that.'

'Oh, Ben — you're fooling me.'

'Ain't never wore no dunce cap,' said Ben with propriety.

'Here — give me the rest of the bread,' said Virginia. 'He's chewing my fingers. Here, Wicky — more victuals, more victuals.'

They watched the rat finish the crust. Virginia looked up at the sky. 'My goodness,' she said, 'I guess it is late. See you to-morrow.'

'Good night,' said Ben. 'If you don't hurry you won't get any supper yourself.'

It was later than she thought. Ben was right about that. She hurried up the trail and over the hedge and into the garden. It was almost dark and as soon as she got in the house Mother wanted to know where she had been. It was an awkward moment, for Mother had telephoned Mrs. Ensley to see if Virginia were playing with Claire, and Mrs. Ensley said that Virginia hadn't been there for days. She managed to squirm out of it by saying that she had 'just been around'.

'But Celia looked all over for you. It's half-past six.'

A casual honesty, discounting the importance of the whole thing, was Virginia's instinctive defence.

'Oh,' she said brightly, 'I went down to the arroyo bottom. I guess that's how she missed me.'

'You climbed all the way down to the bottom?'

'Well — there's a trail. It's not dangerous at all, Mother. The trail goes right down. It's just as easy as anything. It's almost as easy as walking on the sidewalk.'

'But you mustn't do that, darling. You have the whole garden; you have the play house; you may even play in the lot. But Mother doesn't want you to play on the arroyo edge. And you mustn't try to climb down to the bottom. You might fall and hurt yourself. Now promise Mother you won't do that any more.'

'All right.'

'And I have a surprise for you, too.'

'What is it?'

'Wednesday is Claire's birthday. After school she's having a little party. You're invited.'

'A birthday party!'

'Yes — we'll have to get a little present for you to take. You see if you can think of something nice to give Claire.'

'What'll it be, Mother?'

'Now you think what you'd like to have if it were your party.'

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'All right.'

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'A birthday party!'

'Yes — we'll have to get a little present for you to take. You see if you can think of something nice to give Claire.'

'What'll it be, Mother?'

'Now you think what you'd like to have if it were your party.'

'A pet rat!'

'Why, Virginia!'

'Most people don't understand rats, Mother. They have nervous breakdowns just like people.'

'Most people aren't interested in rats. Now see if you can't think of something nice.'

'A wrist-watch.'

'No, that would be too much. A present must be in good taste. It mustn't be too little and it mustn't be too much. Claire's parents could give her a wrist-watch but you wouldn't give her anything like that.'

'Well — I don't know what she wants.'

'How would a nice pocket-book be — something like the one you got on *your* birthday?'

'Oh, that'd be awfully nice, Mother!'

'Then do you want to go shopping with Mother to-morrow afternoon?'

'Yes! Only —'

'Only what?'

'I was thinking what I had to do to-morrow after school.'

'What do you have to do?'

To go see Wicky and Ben was, of course, the natural thing to do, but Mother couldn't be expected to understand that.

'Oh — nothing, I guess. Let's get a red pocket-book! The kind that has a little purse inside.'

'We'll see what we can find,' said Mother.

'Or a green one,' said Virginia lightly. 'It doesn't make any material difference.'

'Doesn't it?'

'No. We only think we see colours. Nothing's really real if you really understand about it the way B . . . — the way I do.'

Mother gave her a puzzled look.

The advent of Claire Ensley's eleventh birthday changed the order of the next two days.

On Tuesday Mother called for her in the Pontiac at school and they went shopping together and selected a red pocket-book with a silk lining containing a small red change purse and a mirror. They had it wrapped as a gift. There was no chance to go to the arroyo bottom to see Ben and Wicky because she was downtown with Mother until half-past five.

And Wednesday was so exciting that it almost eliminated all thought of Ben and Wicky. She hurried home from school and this time it was Mother who helped *her* dress. The braids were combed out and her hair allowed to flow down her back below her shoulders. She washed until her skin shone and then she put on a white organdie dress with a blue sash. In her hair Mother tied a ribbon which matched the sash. But the matter of perfume was really a problem. Virginia wanted to use My Sin, but Mother explained that My Sin simply didn't go with blue and white. And, strangely enough, neither did Cassandra or Christmas Night or Numero Cinq.

'But, Mother, you never go to a party without *something*! What shall I do?'

'Oh, we'll take care of that,' said Mother, cheerfully. 'Shoes next.'

By quarter to five she was ready. Everything was complete except the perfume and Mother settled that by flicking a few drops of cologne on her. It really wasn't a satisfactory substitute at all, but Mother insisted that she smelled beautifully and explained that the person who wore cologne or perfume never could smell it herself. So possibly it was all right.

Virginia surveyed herself in Mother's full-length mirror.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'You look very sweet,' Mother said.

That was nice, of course, but she really didn't want to look sweet. She wanted to look *smart*. If she could have her hair waved, and wear just a tiny *tiny* drop of My Sin . . .

But Mother always came back with the same argument she had always used. 'Wait until you're in your teens. Then you'll be a young lady.'

It was exasperating. What was the strange thing about being in your teens that made it so important?

'Maybe I'll never be in my teens. Maybe I'll *die* before I'm in my teens.' (But that's not so. I won't die. I may never die at all.)

'Virginia — you mustn't have morbid thoughts like that.'

'Can I rouge my lips when I'm thirteen?'

Patiently Mother went over it all once again, even though Virginia knew all the words and Mother knew that she knew them.

'Some time, when you're in your teens, perhaps when you're fourteen, we'll cut your hair and have it waved, and you can carry a compact and be a grown lady. But you won't be a little girl any more. I'll lose my baby then.'

This last was the worst. Mother always sounded sad when she said that. 'I'll lose my baby then.' Virginia hated it. She instinctively revolted against the implied possession. She didn't want to go on being Mother's baby forever. Why did Mother think she would?

'I'll be glad,' said Virginia.

'You don't want Mother to be middle-aged, do you?'

This question was always an enigma. What did Mother think she already was? Grown-ups were grown-ups and all grown-ups were middle-aged. Mother had some of the strangest ideas.

'Find your present now; it's time to go,' Mother said.

The Ensley house was only three blocks away so Virginia

walked to the party, carrying the present 'wrapped as a gift'. Guests were already arriving in cars. Altogether there were twelve girls, counting the hostess, some of whom Virginia did not know. Two of them came from Los Angeles, and there was one guest from *Hollywood* and it was bruited about that she had actually been in the movies — once with Shirley Temple. This distinguished individual was dressed in a smart two-piece suit of tan suède cloth with fur collar and cuffs and gloves to match. Her blonde hair was cut short and waved and she casually explained that she could remember her own eleventh birthday but now that she was thirteen it seemed 'very remote'. Her name was Catherine Kaler and you discovered at once that she hadn't known until the last minute whether the studio would need her this afternoon or not. She was an object of great interest and it was understood that later she might sing. Virginia watched her whenever possible, and as Miss Kaler did not mind being the centre of attraction Virginia was able to stare without unseemly rudeness. To think that she had played with Shirley Temple! And had reached that important age — the teens!

'Yes, Shirley is quite a delightful girl,' said Miss Kaler when pressed. 'I'm fond of Deanna, too.'

Girls began to collect around her and questions were asked.

'Jane? Well, I've never played with Jane so I really can't say. Mickey — yes, a real trouper.'

('Trouper?' Now what do you suppose that meant?)

Questions began to pile upon one another: 'Do you know Jeanette MacDonald? What's Gary Cooper like? Is Clark Gable nice? How 'bout Ronald Colman? Bette Davis? Robert Taylor? Until those in charge of the party — Claire's mother, Mrs. Ensley, and Claire's aunty, Miss Bishop — had difficulty in organizing the first game which consisted of a treasure hunt. Miss Kaler asked to be excused from the treasure hunt, and to the last of her admirers to go she admitted that she really preferred

bridge to childish games. Virginia got near enough to detect a faint odour of perfume emanating from Miss Kaler's person. Well, at least it wasn't My Sin, and some day *she* would be wearing My Sin. She raced away to the treasure hunt which took her all over the house and finally rewarded her with a basket of chocolate doubloons. All of the girls found various 'treasures'. Virginia was one of the first to offer the distinguished guest a chocolate doubloon which was prettily refused. It came as a great surprise to Virginia. That there should be anyone who voluntarily did not eat candy — well!

'Does it make you sick?' asked Virginia.

'Goodness, no,' said Miss Kaler, with perhaps too much emphasis.

'Well, why don't you eat it then?' asked Virginia, still perplexed.

'Well, really —'

'I have a pet rat,' said Virginia, stuffing a doubloon in her mouth, 'and he just *loves* candy.'

'I think I'll go over to the piano and look at the gifts,' said Miss Kaler.

'I'll go with you,' said Virginia. 'I gave Claire a pocket-book. What'd you give her?'

'Oh, Claire dear,' said Miss Kaler, 'may I look at your lovely gifts?'

'You bet!' said Claire.

'That red pocket-book — I gave her that,' explained Virginia.

'I never wear red,' said Miss Kaler.

'Do you use perfume when you're in the movics?' asked Virginia.

Miss Kaler looked at Virginia with a studied criticism. 'You are just a child, aren't you,' she said. It was a statement, not a question.

Virginia sensed the rebuff. It baffled her. Was Miss Kaler

trying to be nasty to her? Was that it? If so, why? It was strange. And why didn't she answer the question about using perfume when acting?

There was no time to settle the issue as a game of musical chairs was in order. Claire's aunty, Miss Bishop, was already at the piano. Again Miss Kaler asked to be excused from playing.

'Maybe she's got a stomach ache,' said Virginia to Claire, but she said it so that half the room could hear.

'Don't know,' said Claire. 'You sick, Cathy?'

'No — go right on with your game, Claire dear.'

The hostess, with the exception of Mrs. Ensley and Miss Bishop, was the only one present who could call the impressive Miss Kaler 'Cathy'.

'Her mother and my mother are cousins,' explained Claire. 'I went to her twelfth birthday party so she's come to my eleventh.'

'Twelfth?' said Virginia. 'I thought she was thirteen.'

'No — twelve,' said Claire.

'Oh,' said Virginia.

'She had the funniest birthday party. There were hardly any children there at all,' said Claire.

'Who was there?' asked Virginia.

'Grown-ups.'

'Huh,' said Virginia.

Movies or no movies, a friend of Shirley Temple or not a friend of Shirley Temple, Miss Kaler lost stature with Virginia at once. Thirteen after all was a young lady; but twelve — well, that meant she wasn't even two years older than Virginia.

'Foocy,' said Virginia to Claire.

'What?'

'Nothing,' said Virginia. 'Just foocy.' They went round and round during the musical chairs. Several girls were eliminated, then Virginia was eliminated, and gradually the

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

contestants wore down to two. Those who were no longer in the game watched and encouraged the finalists from the sidelines. Virginia found a place beside Miss Kaler.

'Don't you like musical chairs?' asked Virginia.

'I don't play games,' said Miss Kaler.

'It doesn't make any material difference,' said Virginia. 'Your name's Material Difference. That's my teacher's name, too. Do you have a teacher?'

'I have a tutor,' said Miss Kaler.

'I never saw you in the movies,' said Virginia pleasantly. 'Not even once.'

'I'm never in B pictures,' replied Miss Kaler.

'What're they?' asked Virginia.

Miss Kaler didn't seem to hear.

'Ever get hit with a pie?' asked Virginia. 'I like pictures where they throw pies.'

Miss Kaler looked around and caught Mrs. Ensley's eye. Mrs. Ensley, across the room, nodded and beamed. 'After this game,' she mouthed in a whisper, enunciating the words with her lips as if Miss Kaler could not hear. Miss Kaler sighed and smiled back.

'What's going to happen then?' asked Virginia.

'Some day,' said Miss Kaler, 'your tongue will stick out so far you'll step on it.'

'Do you have any pets?' asked Virginia.

'I have two Doberman Pinschers. They have blue ribbons.'

'I have a rat. He has nervous breakdowns.'

'And I have my own trailer all fitted up with a kitchenette and a bathroom. And I have —'

'I have a play house and it has —'

'... a *gardener* and a *cook* —'

'We have a gardener and a cook!'

'... and a *secretary* and an *agent* —' continued Miss Kaler.

'What's a secretary and an agent?'

'... and a director and I have my friend Mr. Hornblatt —'

'Who's he?'

'Mr. Hornblatt,' said Miss Kaler with withering finality, 'is a producer.'

'What's he produce?'

'Smash hits.'

'What are they?'

'Did you see *The Eternal Voice*?'

'Oh — you mean movies? No. Were you in it?'

'Certainly. And Mr. Hornblatt produced it.'

'I have a grown-up friend, too,' said Virginia.

'What does *he* do?'

'Collects junk.'

Miss Kaler snorted.

'His wife was a pioneer and got put in the bughouse — like Columbus,' explained Virginia. 'She went around without any clothes on.'

'Disgusting,' said Miss Kaler.

'*You* couldn't do it,' said Virginia. 'I bet Mr. Hornblatt's wife couldn't do it either.'

'You must come from very common people,' said Miss Kaler.

'My mother says that most people in the movies are common.'

'Oh, she does, does she,' said Miss Kaler, rapidly losing patience.

'She won't let me wave my hair the way yours is,' said Virginia. 'Does your mother do it for you?'

'No.'

'Who does?'

'I have a hairdresser. She waves it.'

'If I had an ugly face I'd have to wave my hair, too,' said Virginia.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Why, you little cat,' said Miss Kaler quietly.

'I'm not a cat; I'm a rat. Look, I have side whiskers. See?'

'I never quarrel with children,' said Miss Kaler.

'Fooley,' said Virginia in a loud voice.

'Or use slang,' said Miss Kaler.

'Fooley, fooley, and ka-fooley,' said Virginia.

The conclusion of musical chairs brought this discussion to an end, and temporarily prevented Virginia from expressing any further inarticulate disgust. Mrs. Ensley clapped her hands and stood in the middle of the room and smiled upon everybody. 'And now children,' she beamed, 'everyone find seats. We have a great treat in store for us.' There was a scrambling into chairs and rapt attention. 'Miss Catherine Kaler, Claire's little cousin from Hollywood, has consented to sing. What is it going to be, Cathy?'

There was a craning of necks and a squirming in chairs as everybody looked around for the distinguished guest. Miss Kaler rose, resenting both the 'Cathy' and the 'little cousin', and saying with hauteur, "Roses of Picardy".

'Fooley,' whispered Virginia to Claire.

'What?' asked Claire.

'Ka-fooley,' insisted Virginia.

'Quiet, please,' warbled Mrs. Ensley.

Miss Bishop at the piano struck a chord.

The guests sat with blank expressions on their faces staring at the singer, neither pleasure, boredom, nor excitement being manifest, but a collective solemnity blanketing them all until it had been sung that the *one* rose that bloomed not in Picardy was the rose that Miss Kaler kept in her heart. Whereupon Mrs. Ensley applauded, and gave vent to audible but incoherent praise, and everybody else applauded too. There was some discussion among Mrs. Ensley, Miss Bishop, and the artist about an encore.

'I'm up in Victor Herbert's "Italian Street Song",' said Miss Kaler, 'but I'm afraid it's a little old for them.'

'Oh, do you think so?' Mrs. Ensley asked Miss Bishop.

'I think I'll sing "Some Day My Prince Will Come" instead,' said Miss Kaler, and to her audience she appended, 'from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.'

After this rendition and subsequent applause, Mrs. Ensley bobbed up and chirped, 'Community sing! Community sing! One and all! Community sing!' and Miss Bishop at the piano went into 'Happy Birthday To You'. They began cautiously, gaining slowly in volume and confidence with the soprano assistance of Mrs. Ensley herself, until they reached a cacophonous but generally related harmony in

Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday, Claire Ensley,
Happy birthday to you!

This was followed by 'My Country, 'Tis of Thee' and 'Frère Jacques'. By that time all the inhibitions of the guests had been melted away, and they sang loud and long. Virginia noticed that Miss Kaler, however, was not singing now, but was listening and smiling appreciatively at Mrs. Ensley. Right in the middle of 'Frère Jacques' Virginia thought of the Yow Yow song she had sung for Ben. It all seemed so far away and out of place here — as if it had never happened. You would have to go into that place-where-you-were-alone in order to think back now about Ben and Wicky and she sang 'Frère Jacques' off key and very loud — 'Dormez-vous, dormez-vous' — and all the world of the arroyo bottom faded away again.

Then came the refreshments: the inevitable white birthday cake with eleven candles which had to be blown out by the hostess, and salad, fruit, nuts, candies, chocolate ice cream,

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

peppermint ice cream, marshmallows, nougats, and to Virginia an innovation in sweets, a funny tasting anise cookie. She tried some of everything. 'Good victuals,' she said. 'These are victuals,' she told anyone who cared to listen. 'My rat eats victuals, too.' The gaiety was augmented with paper hats and snappers and favours and everybody had a grand time. About seven o'clock parents began to arrive. Hats and coats had to be found, and good-nights and protestations of gratitude had to be uttered. Miss Kaler was the first to go. Virginia heard her congratulate Claire and tell Mrs. Ensley that she had had 'a most charming day'.

'I'm so glad you could come, Cathy,' said Mrs. Ensley.

'It was a little young for me, but I had a lovely time,' concluded Miss Kaler. Virginia was being passed more anise cookies, and she was no longer sufficiently concerned to think of saying foocy. She merely said 'Anise cakes, yum yum'.

As the guests began to leave Virginia saw Mother standing in the hall. She had brought Virginia's coat and now it had to be worn. Good night had to be said to Claire and Mother asked her if she had thanked Mrs. Ensley.

Virginia hesitated. What was it you were supposed to say? Oh, yes — 'It was a little young for me, but I had a nice time', she said.

'Why, Virginia!' Mother was surprised. Then Mrs. Ensley and Mother laughed and chatted for a moment, and after that they went out to the Pontiac and Mother drove home.

Daddy, of course, had been home for a long time and Celia had dinner ready and they went at once to the table. Fortunately, Mother understood that when you had refreshments at half-past six you couldn't eat your dinner at seven-fifteen. 'Thank goodness birthdays don't come every day,' was all Mother said. Then she told Daddy about Virginia's parting remark to Mrs. Ensley. She quoted it almost word for word, but she used an

inflexion of disdain which Virginia was sure didn't sound at all the way she had sounded. Mother said it with one hand on her hip and her nose in the air, and Daddy seemed to think it had been just the thing to say. It was hard to tell, sometimes, just what grown-ups meant. Maybe they didn't always know themselves.

After dinner she went to her room, and presently Mother came up and they talked about the party and all that had taken place, and just before going to bed Virginia explained that you didn't have to wait until you were thirteen, but at twelve you could have your hair waved and use perfume and wear a suit of tan suède cloth with fur collar and cuffs and gloves to match. Mother said yes, but there wasn't a true ring to it. Virginia was still proving the point at nine o'clock when Mother turned out the light and kissed her good night and went downstairs.

She lay in the dark and decided that it had been a pleasant and interesting day. It would be nicer this minute if she didn't keep tasting the little anise cookies (maybe she shouldn't have eaten the tenth one — especially on top of chocolates and cake and two kinds of ice cream and marshmallows and nougats) but there had been so *many* things you just *had* to taste them all. She tossed and turned for a long time, and in order to keep from thinking how the anise cakes tasted she thought of Ben and Wicky down below in the arroyo. If only she had saved the tenth anise cake and brought it home for Wicky to eat. If only she could go down and see Ben and Wicky to-morrow without having to deceive Mother about it. If only she could — if only — sleep at last defeated the rebellion of a glucose and saccharose-coated stomach, and in the morning she awoke with no ill-effects whatever.

It was Thursday, and she hadn't seen Ben since Monday. Poor Ben might have starved to death in that time. She arrived home from school in the afternoon, and finding it impossible

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

to raid the refrigerator because of Celia's presence, she pilfered a banana and two apples from the fruit dish in the dining-room, and was out of the house and down the trail before Celia noticed that she had disappeared.

She hurried through the chaparral, past Gosh's house (no sign of the gnome) and on to Ben's shack. As she came upon it she saw that Ben was not alone. She stopped and looked at the scene. The big one called Heavy was there. And the one called Tex was there, too. So was the gnome. The gnome seemed to be examining Wicky's cage, which stood on the ground in front of the shack. Ben looked strange and serious. Heavy was saying 'What of it? It ain't anybody's fault, is it?'

'Nuts,' said Tex to Ben, spitting on the sand as he spoke, 'you wanta [spit] make somethin' of it?'

Ben didn't say anything. He just looked down at the cage and swallowed.

'Skip it,' said Heavy. 'See?'

'Come on,' said Tex. 'Let's get goin'.'

They walked on and disappeared beyond into the chaparral. Something was wrong. What was it?

Virginia hurried toward Ben, and he looked up and saw her coming.

'Hello, Ben! I brought some fruit this time.'

Ben nodded, but he didn't speak. Gosh sat on the ground beside the cage and stared up at her.

'What's the matter?' asked Virginia. 'What's wrong, Ben?'

'It's Wicky,' said Ben.

Virginia glanced at the cage. The rat wasn't in it.

'Where is he, Ben?'

'He ain't here,' said Ben helplessly. He looked as if he were going to cry. 'I don't know how, but — he's gone.'

CHAPTER V

HAVE-NOT

I

VIRGINIA stood speechless. 'He's gone,' Ben had said. She opened her mouth to ask questions, but stopped and looked all around. Gosh sat beside the empty cage. Ben stood aimlessly at the door of the shack. She started to say 'Where?' but changed it to 'When?'

Ben shook his head negatively, and Gosh piped, 'We don't know'.

'Did you look all over?' asked Virginia. 'Did you search in the brush? Did you look out on the golf course?'

'I looked everywhere,' Ben said dismally. 'Gosh helped. He's gone.'

'He ain't no place,' said Gosh.

'He never went away before,' said Ben.

'How'd he get away? How did it happen?'

'When I come home,' explained Ben, 'he was gone. Cage door was open.'

'Maybe we can follow his tracks,' said Virginia. She tried to read the sand, scuffed and kicked into illegibility by the feet of Ben and Gosh and Heavy and Tex.

'No use,' said Ben.

Gosh opened his mouth to speak, and they waited for him to form the words. 'Maybe a hawk got him,' he whimpered. 'I saw a hawk yesterday.'

'He never went away before,' reiterated Ben. 'It's no use.'

'Not if a hawk got him,' mumbled Gosh. He looked up at

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

the sky to see if the hawk might be returning to the scene of the crime.

Now that the first shock of the tragedy was over, Virginia resented the attitudes of Gosh and Ben. She was terribly sorry — Oh, dreadfully sorry — that something had happened to their cute little Wicky. She wanted so much to help Ben and to set all this to rights, but at the same time she instinctively resented, 'Maybe a hawk got him', and Ben's hopeless, 'It's no use'. That was no way to act. You didn't just stand around and say, 'Oh, isn't it awful' — no — you *did* something. They would never get Wicky back by saying, 'It's no use'. They'd get him back by searching for him, but doing it in an orderly way, by organizing a searching party. That's what they did when aeroplanes were lost. There was always a searching party and an in-ves-ti-ga-tion. They'd have both. Right away, too! Why, maybe poor Wicky was hurt some place and here they were standing around, saying, 'Maybe a hawk got him' and 'It's no use'.

'This is awful,' said Virginia, 'but maybe he's all right and just got lost — the way children get lost — you know.'

'He never got lost before,' said Ben.

'Well, he's lost now,' declared Virginia. She tossed the fruit she had been carrying down beside Ben's shack, and she said, 'We've got to send out a searching party'. Gosh and Ben didn't say anything.

Virginia looked at them, and when she saw that they weren't going to answer, she said, 'If he's in the brush we can find him. Gosh, you go down that way and you crawl along under the brush between here and your place. Ben can go look the other way up where *they* went —'

'Who?' asked Ben.

'Those two. Heavy and Tex.' She had never called them Heavy and Tex before. It sounded strange — but this was no

time to think of that. 'And look everywhere — go back and forth, like this — don't leave any place unlooked at.'

Gosh stared up at her from his seated position on the sand. 'No use,' he said. Then he sniffed — 'Hawk'.

'I'll go out toward the golf course. I'll crawl under the bushes and I'll look everywhere. If he's in any of those places we'll find him, won't we?'

'I don't know — ' said Ben.

'Well, let's try!' said Virginia. 'Get up, Gosh. Ben, you go that way. And whoever finds him must call "Found" just as loud as he can.'

'Found?' said Gosh. 'Even if it's what the hawk left?'

'Don't look so sad, Ben. He's a smart little rat, isn't he?'

'Oh, yes indeedy — he's very smart.'

'Well, maybe he got stuck under a bush or something. It won't be dark for a long time yet. Let's look everywhere.'

Gosh got to his feet. 'If we can find him,' he squeaked, 'we can bury him.'

'We'll find him,' said Virginia, 'and he won't be hurt a bit. Now look every place carefully. I'm going this way.' She walked into the chaparral to the west, pushing her way through the tough scrub-oak. The branches snapped against her linen dress and the twigs caught on her skirt, and it was a great deal more difficult than it looked. She turned and peered back through the brush. Gosh had disappeared, and Ben was following the trail northward toward the part of the chaparral where Heavy and Tex lived. She turned and stepped forward, bending low and twisting herself around the larger branches, keeping her eyes on the ground and calling softly, 'Here, Wicky — here, Wicky, Wicky, Wicky'. The chaparral scratched her arms and her legs, and often she had to protect her face with her hands. Twice she had to crawl on her hands and knees, and once the growth was so thick that she had to wiggle through on her

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

stomach and came up on the other side with dirt all over her dress. Well, dirt could be brushed off. After every step she would peer around on all sides. Once she found a golf ball. It was an old one with an iron cut. It must have been there a long time. She carried it along with her. It was impossible to examine every square foot of the ground under the chaparral, but it was plain to see that there was no Wicky wherever she looked. She stopped to release her dress from the branch of a thorny shrub, and then pushed on. After a few more steps she emerged from the tangle of scrub and dwarf oaks at the seventh tee of the golf course.

Two men were on the sixth green a few yards away and two caddies were waiting for them. One of them was round and bald-headed and wore white knickers and a white sweater, and the other was middle-sized and wore grey pants and a bright green shirt. The round white one, his back to Virginia, crouched over a putt and tapped the ball which rolled across the green. Nobody moved, the round man maintaining his crouched position with his broad white bottom being his most outstanding feature, until the ball dropped into the cup. It had been a long putt, and the fat man was delighted. He cavorted around in a little circle and pretended to poke Green Shirt in the ribs with his putter. Green Shirt wasn't especially pleased.

Virginia watched from the seventh tee. It was funny the way grown men got so much fun out of playing with a little white ball. Daddy did, too, so it must be all right. One of the caddies held the stick bearing the red flag. He stooped and scooped the ball out of the cup, and set the stick back in. Then the two men came toward the seventh tee carrying their drivers, while the two caddies carried the bags containing the other clubs far down the seventh fairway. Green Shirt was handing the fattish one a paper dollar, and as Virginia watched she recognized the fattish one. It was Mr. Harmon. Both men were mildly

surprised to see her standing on the seventh tee. She waited until they came close before she said, 'Have you seen anything of a tame rat, Mr. Harmon?'

Mr. Harmon looked at her again.

'Goodness gracious godness Agnes,' he said, making a funny face. 'It's Ed Stewart's little girl.'

Green Shirt didn't seem to care whose little girl she was.

'We lost our rat,' explained Virginia, 'and I'm looking for him.'

'Rat?' said Mr. Harmon. 'Lost a rat?'

'Yes, he ran away, and I've looked in the bushes and he's not there, and Ben doesn't know where he is either. Do you think a hawk got him?'

'Did you fall down and hurt yourself?' asked Mr. Harmon.

Virginia looked at her dress. There was dirt all over it from wriggling through the chaparral on her stomach. And dirt on her hands and her knees, and although she couldn't see it, a smudge on her forehead. 'No, I didn't hurt myself. But we've got to find our rat.'

'You know Ed Stewart,' said Mr. Harmon to Green Shirt. 'This is his daughter.'

'What's he do, keep her under the barn?' asked Green Shirt.

Virginia immediately disliked Green Shirt.

'How are your mama and daddy?' inquired Mr. Harmon.

'They're all right,' said Virginia. (Was there any use in asking Mr. Harmon more about Wicky? No — probably not.)

'Your honour, Ralph,' said Green Shirt.

Mr. Harmon teed his ball and took his stance.

'Double or nothing,' he said.

'Done,' Green Shirt said.

After a false address, Mr. Harmon set his feet squarely and wiggled his broad bottom, raising the club over his right shoulder. Down it came, so fast you couldn't see it, but you could hear it cut the air and hear the whack. The ball was lost

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

for a moment in the air, but presently landed on the fairway a long way ahead where the caddies were waiting. Mr. Harmon was delighted. 'That's going to cost you a two-dollar bill,' he chortled. 'I'll be on the green in two.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Green Shirt, teeing his ball.

'Want a side bet on that?' asked Mr. Harmon.

'No,' said Green Shirt.

'My daddy's game is practically professional,' said Virginia.

'Where did you find that ball?' asked Mr. Harmon.

'Back there,' said Virginia. 'It's no good.' She handed it to him.

'Silver King,' he said. 'You can have it.'

'Daddy uses Wilsons,' said Virginia. 'He says he gets best results with them.'

Green Shirt turned from his stance and glared at her.

'Quiet,' said Mr. Harmon.

Green Shirt drove the ball into space. It curved to the right while in the air, and then bounded off the fairway into a sand trap. Mr. Harmon made a funny face, and Green Shirt muttered under his breath.

'You slice,' said Virginia.

Green Shirt gave her a look.

'You're a big help,' he said.

'Two dollars worth!' laughed Mr. Harmon.

'You're sure you haven't seen my rat?' asked Virginia.

'They ought to keep kids off the course,' said Green Shirt.

'No — no. You don't want to hunt for rats,' said Mr. Harmon.

'Now, young ladies shouldn't be rolling around in the dirt. You better run home and wipe your nose.'

'Wha — !' gasped Virginia. (Wipe my nose!)

The men were ready to leave the tee, but Mr. Harmon had another thought. 'Do you know why little pigs eat so much?' he inquired.

'You asked me that before,' snapped Virginia. 'It's because they want to make *hogs* of themselves. Then you made a face, like this.' She squinted her eyes and puckered her lips. 'That's what you did.'

'Did I — well, I hope I never look like *that* again. Now you better run on home to mama.'

(Oh — how revolting! Run on home to mama! Wipe your nose! *Mother* she always called her — not *mama*. Oh!)

Mr. Harmon left the tee, and Green Shirt, following him, said, 'Good-bye, Patty Berg'.

Mr. Harmon walked on down the fairway, and Green Shirt walked off toward the sand traps at the right. There was something about Mr. Harmon that made you want to behave simply awful. Yell foocy — or *something*. And that fresh Green Shirt, saying she lived under a barn and calling her names!

'Dub!' she called after Green Shirt, and when he turned to look back she darted into the chaparral and began to claw her way back, stooping, and scratching her hands, and shouldering her way through the oak maze. There was no use scrambling through the chaparral any longer. Even if Wicky were in it he would be as safe as anything. And he'd go home to Ben unless he got confused. No hawk would ever get him in here. Maybe he was home already while she was twisting through these nasty bushes. Maybe everything was all right after all.

She crawled out of the chaparral at Ben's shack. Ben hadn't returned, but Gosh was sitting on the sand, his back against the shack. 'Couldn't find him,' he said, lugubriously. 'No use lookin'.'

Virginia sat down on the sand in front of Gosh. 'Maybe he'll come back by himself,' she said.

'Not if a hawk got him.'

'Oh, no hawk got him!' said Virginia, irritably. She examined the scratches on her arms and a rip in one of her socks. She

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

brought her knees up and rubbed the dirt off them. 'Just look what I did.' It was the first time she had ever talked to Gosh, but she took him for granted, and paid attention only to rehabilitating her clothes. He watched her, his mouth open slightly. Her spread knees and raised skirt exposed most of her thighs, but she was unaware of Gosh's stare as she rubbed the earth from her knee-caps.

'Just look at Paul,' said Virginia. 'How did you get so dirty? And look at Pauline. She's dirtier yet. Why, you bad Pauline.'

Gosh didn't understand this conversation with a pair of knees, but he was interested in watching, nonetheless.

Ben came trudging back. He shook his head sadly. 'He's gone,' he mumbled.

'Maybe he'll come home, Ben.'

'No,' said Ben, 'I know he's gone for good.' He sat down on the broken chair. Virginia finished brushing herself off. Suddenly she felt as melancholy as Ben. Their search had been a failure. Probably they would never see Wicky again.

'Poor little fellow,' said Ben.

Virginia looked at the empty cage.

'Oh, Ben, I think maybe he'll come back — somehow.'

'It'll be dark pretty soon,' said Ben, 'and he won't be able to find his way back.'

'If he ain't all tore apart,' said Gosh, 'and et.'

Nobody said anything, and a spirit of gloom pervaded the arroyo bottom. Virginia scooped up sand in her palm and let it trickle out between her fingers. The sun began to sink behind Flintridge. Gosh and Ben just sat. Nobody knew what to say. And there was nothing anybody could do. They had searched for him, and what could you do after that? Give him up? No. No, not yet. You could still go into the place-where-you-are-alone and think about him. He was still there in *that* place, all right. And not a scratch on him either. Not a whisker

touched. And if he met a hawk in that place, the hawk wouldn't hurt him. The hawk would like him and they would become friends. Why couldn't it be that way? *Really* be that way? After all, the place-where-you-are-alone is all there is, Ben had said. It was the only thing that was really real. Not bushes and trees and the Santa Fe Streamliner. You only *thought* they were real. But they weren't because nothing was, except the Place. And that's where Wicky was right now — in that Place.

'He's all right, Ben!' said Virginia, suddenly.

He shook his head sadly.

'No!' exclaimed Virginia. 'I see where he is now! He's in the Place.'

'Well — ' said Ben.

'Hawk's place,' said Gosh.

'No — can't you understand, Ben?' said Virginia. 'It's like the Streamliner. He's only lost because we think he's lost. He's not *really* lost!'

'Well — ' said Ben doubtfully.

'Oh, he'll be back!' exclaimed Virginia. 'Why, it's just as easy — can't you see, Ben? If you just *know* he's coming back, Ben, he'll be back. Why, I bet he comes home to-night!'

'No,' whined Gosh. 'He's been et. All blood and bones.'

Virginia didn't listen. She jumped up. 'Oh, Ben, I'm so glad he's all right! You'll see! If he comes home to-night, Ben, will you let me know some way?'

'Well — ' said Ben. 'I'm afraid we'll never see him again, Virginia.'

'But he's part my rat,' insisted Virginia. 'And if he comes home I have a right to know, haven't I, Ben?' (He'll be home, all right!)

'Yes indeedy.'

'So will you tell me?'

'How can I?' asked Ben.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'My room is the back room upstairs. If you gave a whistle from the top of the trail I could hear it. Then I'd know he was back and everything was all right. Will you do that, Ben?'

'Yes indeedy,' said Ben. 'If he comes home I'll come up and whistle three whistles so you can hear it. Like this —' He whistled three notes of a scale, the first three notes of the melody 'Over There'.

'I'll keep the door open on to my balcony,' said Virginia. 'I'll be sure to hear it then.' She noted the lengthening shadows. 'Here's a golf ball I found. Want it, Gosh?'

Gosh nodded.

She tossed it, and he caught it and dropped it and examined it.

'No good,' he said forlornly. 'It's cut — see?'

'Then save it for Wicky. He can have fun with it. Don't forget to whistle, Ben. Good night!' She turned and skipped along the trail. She went up the path in long strides, singing under her breath.

'I have a little rat
With a funny little hat
And he's coming home to-night.
Machiavellian
Ideology
He's coming home to-night.'

In her house Virginia went to her room and took off her dress. It was best to change it so that Mother wouldn't ask too many questions. She washed her hands and face (that old Mr. Harmon — what's *he* know about anything) and put on a white middy blouse and a pleated navy blue skirt.

Later Mother remembered that she had left the house for school in the morning wearing a pink and white linen, and she inquired about the change.

'I fell down,' Virginia explained.

'Did you hurt yourself?'

'Oh, no. Not at all. Not a bit.'

'Where did you fall? In the school yard?'

'No — not there.'

'On the street?'

'No. Near it.'

'Near *what*?'

'Near the school yard. Mother, if a person had a pet rat and it got lost, it *would* come home again, wouldn't it?'

'Goodness, do they ask you things like that in school?'

'No.'

'Well, who has a pet rat?'

(That's right, Mother couldn't know anything about this. Be careful.)

'Oh — *you* have!' said Virginia.

'What?'

'Yes. I'm a rat. I scamper all over you. See?' She ran her fingers up and down Mother's arms.

'Virginia — what *are* you doing?'

'I have side whiskers — like this. And I gnaw things — like this. Look, Mother — gnaw, gnaw.'

'Just what *is* all this rat talk?' asked Mother, perplexed.

(Be careful. Watch out.)

'Is it nature study in school?' asked Mother.

(It *could* be, couldn't it?)

'Sometimes we study animals,' said Virginia.

(It was getting too close for comfort. Better change it.)

'What's Machiavellian ideology mean?' asked Virginia. (For he's coming home to-night.)

'Oh, goodness,' said Mother. 'You better look those words up in the dictionary.'

(That's better.)

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'All right — I'll go do it,' said Virginia. She skipped out of the room.

This was one of the nights that Mother and Daddy went out after dinner, and Virginia spent the hour from eight to nine in her room and Celia came up to keep her company. It proved to be a difficult hour for Celia. She found it impossible to take part in a conversation that had predominantly to do with rats, and to make it physically uncomfortable, Virginia insisted that it was hot in the room, and had to have the door open on to the balcony that overlooked the garden. And not only that, but she insisted upon going out on the balcony every few minutes. Celia breathed a sigh of relief at nine o'clock. The routine protestations about bed, and the delays occasioned by getting undressed, consumed another fifteen minutes, but at last Celia was able to turn out the light and escape downstairs where she could turn on the radio and listen to a talk on the forces of light by an accredited representative of the ascended master, St. Germain. Only recently had she forsaken the evangelicalisms of Aimee Semple McPherson and thrown her allegiance to the more fantastic Church of the I Am. The old and familiar hymns were missing, but the fact that through your very body the Masters were about to requalify the whole world gave you a feeling of responsibility that even battling Aimee's arch-enemy, Satanic iniquity, hardly equalled. At this very instant, by keeping dynamic and allowing the Masters to work through her, she was saving the peace of Europe, relieving the worries of millions, and lending a helping hand to the universal routing of all human misery, and it was a titillating thrill to the ego. The old time religion was still a fine thing, but to be in the know with an Ascended Master, well — not everybody accomplished that.

About half-past ten she retired to her own room off the kitchen. Had she, by chance, been prompted to take a stroll into the garden before retiring, she would doubtless have been

startled, and perhaps frightened, by a figure clothed in ghostly white which stood on the balcony. And a recent lecture on the I-Am-Presence would have at once associated itself with this ghostly wraith lurking over her bedroom window, and she would have known that St. Germain had singled her out, until the figure would become Virginia in her white nightgown, standing on the balcony in the night air, defying pneumonia and not knowing it, and would return inside only when confronted with the dire threats of what would happen should Celia tell Mother.

But Celia did not take any unprecedented night stroll in the garden, and the figure in the white nightgown stayed too long on the balcony, and did not retire inside until her skin was goose flesh and she had a chill. Shivering she crawled back into bed. There had been no signal. Of that she was sure. Wicky had not come home. What had gone wrong? Why hadn't it worked when in that place-where-she-was-alone it was *bound* to work? Could Ben and Gosh be right? A hawk, after all? No! It couldn't be that way. She wouldn't *have* it that way. He was *so* coming home. She would lie here in bed and think hard about it. Nothing else was really real.

By noon the next day she was sniffing and sneezing, but she thought nothing of it. During the arithmetic class she was given the problem: if A can do twice as much work in 1 hour as B, and B can do one-third as much more in 1 hour than C, how long will C have to work to accomplish what A can do in three and a half hours? It was a problem of fractions, and easy enough if you understood reducing to a common denominator. She immediately put it in thirds and sixths and computed the answer. The interesting thing was not the answer, which was 10 hours and 30 minutes, but the fact that strong husky A was Heavy, average working B was, of course, Ben, and poor little C was Gosh. You could hardly expect Gosh to keep up with Heavy.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

After school, still sniffing, she rode home on the street car with its rattlety-rattle clink-clink, and she thought of the first time she had ever seen Ben and Wicky. They had seemed so strange, and now they were her best friends, and she was in a terrible hurry to get home, and then down to the arroyo bottom to see if Wicky had been found.

She tossed two school books inside the kitchen door, and went at once to the arroyo edge. Mother's coupé wasn't in the garage, which meant that Mother was out. That helped. She hopped down the trail, and hurried along through the chapparal, and when she came to Gosh's house she saw a stranger — a man of middle size in a worn-out brown suit who had been standing perfectly still staring at Gosh's shack. He turned and stared at her. He didn't belong in the arroyo and she passed on, putting him out of her mind at once.

Ben was there — and Gosh — and she could tell without asking that Wicky had not returned. Ben was at work on some kind of gadget.

'Hello, Virginia,' he said.

Gosh peered up at her.

'What are you making?' she asked.

'Don't rightly know,' Ben said.

Virginia saw that Ben had taken apart the wire treadmill that used to spin inside Wicky's cage.

'Might make a grill out of it.'

'A grill?'

'To cook on. Like when you broil something.'

'Oh.'

She squatted down in order to see better.

'He never come home,' said Gosh sadly.

'Or I might make somethin' else out of it,' said Ben. 'Can't say yet.'

'He's good and dead now,' whined Gosh.

'You could make one of those wire things that hold flowers,' suggested Virginia.

'All chewed to pieces,' said Gosh.

'Yeah — I could,' said Ben.

'In some hawk's belly,' said Gosh.

'Or you could make a waste basket out of it — you know, the wire kind.'

'Yes indeedy,' said Ben.

'Tore apart and et alive,' said Gosh. 'Head and all.'

'Oh, stop that!' said Virginia, sharply.

Gosh looked surprised.

'You mustn't talk like that,' said Virginia. 'That spoils it.'

'Spoils it?' said Gosh.

'That's not the way it is.'

'But Ben thinks he's dead,' mumbled Gosh. 'Dead and et.'

'Well, I *don't* think he's dead and et — so there,' said Virginia.

All three looked up as the stranger in the shabby brown suit came along the trail. He paused and looked at the group — Ben, sitting on the wobbly chair, Virginia sitting on the sand, and Gosh sprawled on his side. For a moment nobody spoke, and then the stranger said, 'Hello, men'.

Ben nodded slightly and Gosh stared open-mouthed, and Virginia squirmed around in order to see better. The stranger walked on, passing north along the trail in the direction of the domicile of Heavy and Tex. He took his time, and he seemed to be looking around carefully.

Virginia inhaled deeply, her face contorting, and exhaled at once with a sneeze.

'You know what we oughta have?' asked Gosh.

'What?' asked Virginia.

He opened his mouth, but the word wasn't there.

'*What?*' insisted Virginia.

'The — funeral,' he whispered.

'Do you think so, too, Ben?'

'Well —' said Ben. 'He was a nice little fella.'

Virginia considered it. 'It would be something to do, wouldn't it? Sort of a game, I mean. I could be Forest Lawn Cemetery and you could telephone me at the time of sorrow.'

'We could make a grave,' said Gosh. 'Just like he was in it.'

'One telephone call does everything. That's what the ads say, Ben. Have you seen them?'

'I reckon not,' said Ben.

'We'll make the cemetery over there — by — ah —' the sentence was lost in a sneeze. 'We'll have mourners and pole-bearers and everything,' she explained, rubbing her nose and breathing through her mouth.

'Virginia caught cold,' said Ben. 'That's too bad.'

'I'll be the Bible — Gosh can be the coffin — Ben can be the family.' She shivered.

'We oughta have sad music,' said Gosh. 'They always have sad music.'

'No,' said Virginia abruptly. 'We can't do it after all. It isn't right.'

'No sad music?' asked Gosh.

'No funeral at all,' said Virginia. 'That's not the way it is. He's not *really* dead. We can't play that.'

'Too bad,' muttered Gosh. He lay on his stomach on the sand in front of her. Part of the time she sat with her legs flat, but part of the time she sat with her knees raised, and when that happened Gosh liked to look.

But why not play funeral? Why not give up and admit that he was dead? She shivered. No use trying to fool yourself, is there? 'It's kind of cold down here,' she said.

'You oughta drink some hot lemonade for that cold,' said Ben.

'Will that fix it?'

'Some,' said Ben. 'You oughta lie down and rest, too.'

'Maybe I will. I don't feel so good. First hot and then cold.' She stood up. Gosh watched.

'What does your mother do when you have a cold?' asked Ben.

'She gives me something for it — something with a long name. I forget what it is.'

'Well, if I was you,' said Ben, 'I'd go up to my house and get some of it right away.'

'Maybe I will. I'll come right back.'

'That's right,' said Ben.

The two men watched her go.

'If she was my little girl,' said Ben, 'I'd watch out for that cold.'

Gosh said nothing. He lay face down in the soft sand and closed his eyes.

When Celia was asked for a lemonade she refused to take the request seriously. 'Spoil your dinner,' she said.

Virginia didn't answer. Somehow it wasn't worth arguing with Celia. She found Mother at home, and she sat down beside her in the library. She didn't have to tell Mother that she didn't feel well. Mother knew it at once. And after a sniffle and a sneeze Mother took full charge.

Virginia had to show her tongue and have her pulse felt and have her temperature taken with the little thermometer which was kept in the medicine closet in Mother's bathroom. And within two minutes her clothes were off and her nightgown was on, and she was in bed with an extra eiderdown, and Celia had to come up with the hot lemonade, after all. Sometimes it was fun being sick, because you were the centre of all attention and the whole house was at your beck and call — but not this time. It felt good to be in bed, and she lay still and stared up at the ceiling. Poor Ben and Gosh — they had no warm room and no comfortable bed and nobody to look after them when they were sick. And poor little Wicky. Lost for ever, maybe.

Eaten by a hawk after all, maybe. To be eaten alive! Ugh — how horrible. She turned on her side and buried her head in her pillow.

Life was sad sometimes. Sad, sad. And poor Ben grieving for little Wicky. Right this minute he was waiting for his little rat to come home, and he was never coming home. It made a place feel hollow way inside you and there was a lump in your throat that you tried to swallow, only the lump got bigger and your eyes got misty and made the pillow damp and you caught your breath.

Then Mother asked if you felt worse, and you said, 'No — ' but when you said it the word got lost in a sob. Mother was awfully kind and nice and loving, but she couldn't understand that what you were crying about was a poor little rat who was half your rat, and who got lost and hurt and died all by himself, away from you and Ben who loved him. Every other time in her life when something terrible and serious had happened she had been able to tell Mother. But now Mother wouldn't understand about Wicky. It was something you had to suffer all by yourself.

When Daddy came home he took her temperature, and he said she didn't have any fever, just a head cold, and that they wouldn't send for the doctor unless she got worse. Mother didn't seem to be so sure, and when they went down to dinner they were still talking about it.

By keeping very still so that the pillow didn't crinkle under your ear you could hear them talking at dinner — just the sound of voices way off coming through the darkness, no words at all. And at times you could hear the more positive clatter of a knife or a fork on a plate, but even that, too, was way off. And then, as she lay still, from somewhere equally far away, but so plain that you couldn't mistake it, came the three whistled notes — e, g, c — 'O-ver There'.

The signal!

Just once it came, and she raised up in bed with a start. Then she sat still, waiting, afraid to move for fear of blotting out any repetition. She couldn't have imagined it. It was too plain for that. And now — silence.

Cautiously she put one foot out of bed — then another. Holding her breath she slipped from the covers and stood beside the bed. She turned, and began to tiptoe in long strides toward the door which led out on to the balcony.

Then, before she reached the door, it came again, plainer than before, absolutely no room for doubt — 'O-ver There'.

Wicky was home!

There was no other meaning — Wicky was home and Ben had told her so just as he promised to do! In her excitement she abandoned caution, forgot to tiptoe, and started to open the door on to the balcony. For one instant she enjoyed the ecstasy of sheer delight, unrepressed uninhibited celebration comparable to an armistice night, or a New Year's Eve. She wouldn't have been at all surprised to hear distant bells, chimes, shots, and whistles. Found — found — found! In her joy she turned from the door to the balcony, and hurried back to bed. For Mother had heard her moving about, and Mother was half way up the stairs. But it was all right; nothing mattered now; she could explain somehow to Mother.

And she did by saying she had got up to go to the bathroom, and Mother seemed to believe it, and tucked her in bed again. And she insisted to Mother that she felt better — much better — oh, so much better — and after a minute Mother went downstairs to finish her dinner. Virginia could hear her talking to Daddy, but she couldn't make out the words.

'She's so volatile,' said Mother. 'An hour ago she was a sick girl, and now she seems perfectly all right.'

'Nervous temperament,' said Daddy.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Nervous exhaustion, I think,' said Mother. 'She works hard at her lessons and gets excellent grades. Perhaps she overdoes it without realizing it. At any rate, I'm going to keep her in bed for a few days.'

Upstairs, Virginia lay in the darkness, and forgot that she ever had a cold. She relaxed, enjoying the full meaning of that signal. He wasn't dead — he had never been dead — and she had known it from the start in that place-where-you-are-alone. Ecstasy graduated to an enduring rapture, and after some time she slept.

II

It was Friday night when Ben whistled the signal that Wicky had come home. But it was not until the following Tuesday that Virginia was able to get down to the arroyo bottom and rejoice with Ben over the reunion. Mother kept her in bed Saturday and Sunday, and even though her cold had gone except for a slight hoarseness, Mother wanted her to stay home from school on Monday. During those three days great changes occurred in the chaparral.

Dean arrived.

On Sunday afternoon Virginia got out of bed, and Mother let her sit on the balcony overlooking the garden. It was warm and sunny, and the fresh air was pleasant. She sat and read *Ferdinand the Bull* and *Valdemar the Dachshund* and *Swiss Family Robinson*. This last reminded her of Ben and the arroyo, and from time to time she kept an eye on the path across the lot which Ben used in coming to and from the trail to the bottom. But Ben was not to be seen — nor were Gosh nor Heavy nor Tex. One man did pass across the lot twice, however, but he didn't belong to the arroyo. He was the stranger in the worn-out

brown suit, and she remembered that he had been prowling around down there the other day. He was of no interest at all. She went on with her book.

Ben couldn't say who discovered that the stranger's name was Dean, but somebody must have heard it, because that was his name all right. He wasn't a big fellow like Heavy. He was only five feet ten, if quite that, and he spoke crisply but quietly. He had dark hair and dark eyes. Unlike most of the fraternity, he contrived to shave almost every day, though his clothes were not much better than the misfit garments of the others — well, yes they were, a bit perhaps, when you looked twice.

Dean had a saturnine, almost sullen, countenance, and nobody ever saw him smile. He wasn't young and he wasn't old, but his bronzed raptorial face was definitely lined. Sometimes he used words which Gosh and Heavy didn't understand, and of which Ben had only a foggy notion: words like 'national socialism' and 'state ownership of the means of production' and 'class war' and 'dictatorship of the asses and masses'. And once he told the men they were the 'army of the have-nots'.

Heavy said, 'That's us', and Tex said, 'You tellin' me?' while Ben said, 'It's how you look at it', and Gosh scratched his head and didn't even say 'Gosh'. Dean asked a number of questions about the arroyo: how long they had all been here, and if there had been any trouble about it, and who else came around, and one or two other questions which nobody could answer.

They sprawled on the sandy area in front of Ben's shack late Monday afternoon, and Dean said, 'It looks like a pretty good chance'.

'What for?' asked Heavy.

'To make it work,' said Dean.

'Make what work?' asked Tex.

'The future,' said Dean.

'Gosh,' said Gosh.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'What's eatin' you?' asked Tex.

'Look here,' said Dean, 'how many you men Communists?'
Nobody acquiesced.

'How many Fascists?'

No response.

'That's what I thought,' said Dean. 'You're just like me.'

'What're you?' asked Tex.

'I'm a hundred percent American,' said Dean, 'and I got my own system. There's good ideas in all systems, but nobody has thought of the one system that takes all the good ideas and puts 'em under one head. I've had a lot of time to sit and do some thinkin' lately, and I saw the future.'

'Where was you sittin'?' asked Heavy.

'Durance vile,' said Dean.

'*What* vile?' asked Heavy.

'In stir,' said Dean.

'Oh,' said Heavy.

'What jug?' asked Tex.

'Florence, Arizona.'

'What racket?' asked Tex.

'None of your business,' said Dean.

'Okay,' said Tex.

'When a man asks himself why he has to sit in one place for two years, if he's got any brains he finds the answer. I found it.'

'What was it?' asked Tex.

'What makes a man break the law?' asked Dean. 'Want, hunger, necessity — a yen to cotton on to the things that naturally belong to every man but which the system won't let any but the rich man have. It ain't the men inside the walls that's wrong. No. It's the system that put 'em there. So the system's got to go.'

'Atta stuff,' said Tex.

'Where to?' asked Heavy.

'Hell,' said Dean.

'Gosh,' said Gosh.

'And in place of the old way we'll have the new way. And if there's some people who don't like it they can shut up or get out. I don't want no foreigners in this. And I'm against Catholics, Jews, coons, and tycoons of all kinds. Nothing but one hundred percent white Americans like us here. Then we vote for national social legislation which means that we socialize everything that every man has got to have.'

'What's socialize mean?' asked Tex.

'Means it belongs to everybody — share and share alike.'

'Atta stuff,' said Tex. 'I'm for it.'

'We socialize all wealth, food, clothes, houses — maybe even automobiles. I'll figure that out later.'

'A car for every guy?' asked Tex.

'Maybe.'

'Oh, boy!' said Tex.

'Why, hell, that won't work,' said Heavy.

'I'll take a white Rolls Royce,' said Tex. 'Can't you see me burnin' up the highway? Beep-beep. Look out, dames, here I come!' He steered his imaginary car, running it over Gosh and pushing him aside. 'Beep-beep — out of my way, dim-wit, I'm in the dough.'

Dean was staring at Heavy.

'Be careful about sayin' it won't work,' he warned. 'We kick guys like that out with the coons and the kikes.'

'Beep-beep!' said Tex, 'here I come, fellows. Tell us some more, Dean!'

'All the men that are in jails get let out. All the rich birds get put in — unless they give up their money to the state. Makin' too much money will be a crime. The first guy that does it — zip!' He made a gesture of slitting his throat. 'So the hundred percent American state will own everything — factories,

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

farms, utilities, booze, the army, the navy, the press, houses, land —'

'Movies?' asked Tex.

'Sure — movies, burleycue shows — everything government-owned.'

'Oh, nuts,' said Heavy.

'Except maybe about five thousand dollars a year which everybody gets over twenty-one.'

'I'll be twenty-one next year,' said Tex. 'Hot damn!'

'We'll pass a law to blow up the stock market and maybe Henry Ford and the Standard Oil Company with it. Niggers and Japs and Reds get run out of the country, and we'll send all the Catholics to Italy and all the Jews to Germany.'

'Beep-beep,' said Tex. 'Red light says stop.'

'All red light districts will be free,' continued Dean, 'and good whisky will be fifty cents a pint.'

'Lead me to it!' said Tex.

'Lotta crap,' said Heavy.

'A little fellow like Gosh here,' said Dean, 'has been starved by rich bastards. He was prob'ly a full-sized man before the depression.'

'Me?' said Gosh.

'But the tycoons shrunk him down to half-pint size and all he has to eat is used golf-balls.'

'You're as funny as a crutch,' growled Heavy.

'And, even though this big ape don't like it,' continued Dean, 'the future's not so far removed as it seems, and it ain't gonna be far from like I said, impossible as it may sound to-day. I've seen free and white Americans pawing over the city dump at Sacramento, the capital of this state, trying to find a little garbage to eat. I've seen American children starvin' for orange juice while the oranges rot on the ground because it don't pay the tycoons to harvest 'em. But they'd rather let 'em rot than give

'em to a starvin' kiddy. A Jew movie tycoon makes over a million dollars a year income and I've seen seventeen-year-old girls walkin' the streets for twenty-five cents. I've seen young men go to jail because they were so hungry they went out an' took the food nature meant 'em to have. And now state and federal government got to build new jails because there's more pourin' into them than goes out. All that's the result of the old way. I've seen it in California; I've seen it in South Carolina; I've seen it in Cleveland and Detroit and Chicago. Patchin' up the old way won't work. We got to cut this economic cancer out of society and start over. Organize all men according to what they can do. That's the mass. Let the best ones be the leaders. Then there's got to be one leader who's the head of the whole works. But he's only the servant of the state and the state is everybody. I'm no red; I'm no brown shirt or black shirt. But I say every free and white American has a right to live and live decent. And this U.S.A. is rich enough just the way it stands to-day so that every one hundred percent American could have enough to eat and a house to live in and clothes on his back and a little money in his pocket. Yes, every one of us right here. And in your skulls maybe you think I'm crazy and a bag of wind, and if you think that, I'm satisfied — because if you think that you'll challenge me. And that's all I want, some bird that'll challenge me and say "It can't be done", and then I'll show you whether it can be done or not — yes, and done right here in this arroyo. We can start the whole thing right here and now, men, right here and now.'

'The hell you can,' said Heavy.

'There! Hear that, men? It can't be done, he says. Challenges hundred percent Americanism, he does, and tries to stop progress. Let's make an issue out of it, men, let's come to the point right now. This is the acid test. Let's bring the future to the present.'

'Shoot the works, Dean!' said Tex.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

Dean got up and paced back and forth, thrusting his arguments and his logic upon each member of the audience in turn.

'This arroyo don't belong to us separately,' he told them all. 'Private property don't exist down here. This is the future comin' right into your laps, men. Yours, and yours, and yours, and yours. And why ain't there no private property down here no more? Because from now on it belongs to all of us together — provided, of course, we have the good sense to vote it that way. Cause you never can do anything without votin' on it first. Otherwise it wouldn't be one hundred percent American. Majority rules. Liberty or death. Ain't that so, men?'

'Durn tootin',' agreed Tex.

Gosh and Ben sat staring at Dean, and Heavy sneered in unconcealed disgust. *'Pershing Square politician,' he said. 'Sellin' corn plasters.'*

'So you can't fence off a part of this land and keep it for yourself,' Dean told Ben. 'That's the old way. We're gonna run this the new way. Nobody gets more than anybody else,' he informed Gosh. 'If one eats we all eat,' he told Tex, and to Heavy he said, 'because there's none so dumb as those who will not sec.' And to the group in general he declared, 'The old way didn't have any system, but the new way takes care of all of us. Everybody understand?'

'What's wrong with things the way they are now?' asked Heavy. 'It was all right until you begun bellyachin'.'

'No planning,' said Dean. 'Under the old way you couldn't tell what'd happen next. Maybe you'd go hungry and cold. Maybe one fellow had enough to live on for a week and nobody else had anything. Them days is gone for ever.'

'Who says so?' asked Heavy.

'I say so,' said Dean.

'Oh, yeah?' said Heavy.

'Yeah,' said Dean.

'What do you think you are, the big cheese?' asked Heavy.

'Now listen, men,' said Dean, dropping his oratory 'to an intimate and grave persuasiveness, 'the old way,' — he enumerated on his fingers — 'starvation, insecurity, cold, watch your step, cheat your best friend, gut your own brother, spit on by the tycoons, scum of the earth. How do you like it?' Before they could answer he raised his voice to powerful assertion with, 'But from now on that is gone forever! And now we're going to have peace and prosperity — good eats — no work — live in clover — take life easy — gin and beer and a woman when you want her — share and share alike — one hundred percent Americanism — now what do you want, men? The old way or the new way?'

'The new way!' yelled Tex.

'Crap and apple sauce,' said Heavy. 'You make me puke.'

'All right, men! It's an issue!' fired Dean. 'And there's only one way to decide it. We'll put it to a vote. From now on life in this arroyo goes forward or backward. There's no *middle course*. We got to have the old way or the new way. We'll put it squarely up to the people. We'll take a vote on it right here and now. The votin's open, men, and I'm castin' the first vote for *the new way*! That makes one.' He turned on Tex. 'Which way you votin', kid?'

'Me? Well — ' Tex considered. 'I'll try anything once so —'

'That's two votes for the new way,' said Dean. 'Yes, two. No, none.'

'I'm votin' *no*!' said Heavy. 'I'm against it.'

'Two to one in favour of it,' said Dean. 'How you votin', little fellow?' he asked Gosh. 'You wanta eat or you wanta starve?'

'Gosh — I wanta eat.'

'Yes or no?'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Yes,' piped Gosh.

'Three to one for the new way,' said Dean.

'Wait a minute,' growled Heavy.

'Don't butt in on an election,' said Dean. 'How about you, old guy? New or old?'

'Well,' said Ben, 'I ain't at all sure.'

'Why not?' asked Dean.

'Just ain't.'

'You got to vote yes or no,' commanded Dean.

'Leave him talk,' said Heavy.

'Well, I ain't at all sure,' said Ben. 'I don't know — I —'

'Declines to vote,' said Dean. 'Election's over. Yes, three; no, one; declines to vote, one. New way's carried three to one. Congratulations, men!'

'Gosh,' said Gosh.

'You can't get away with that stuff here,' said Heavy.

'Listen, you,' said Dean, calmly. 'Ever hear about the guy in a cell rattlin' on the bars and yellin' "You can't put me in jail!" Well, where is he? He's in jail, ain't he?'

'So what?' said Heavy.

'Then don't tell me I can't get away with this stuff here. It's already done. These men voted fairly and squarely, and you heard every one of 'em. They voted for the new way three to one. That's a pretty big majority. You're the only one against it. If you don't like the way we run this place, you can get out.'

'There's somethin' phoney about this,' said Heavy. 'Who the hell told you to come bustin' in here talkin' new way stuff and actin' like you was —'

'Listen,' said Dean. 'We're startin' a system here for the good of everybody in it. It's passed by a majority. The men want it. And by God if you try to hold this system back and try to bust up what the majority wants, we'll kick your fat ass the hell out. Just because you're a big fellow don't think these men are

afraid of you. It's the system we're workin' for, and by God, we won't let any man stop it. Will we, men?'

'No!' said Tex.

'He's the kind of a guy that would take the bread out of your mouth,' said Dean, pointing a tanned finger at Heavy.

They all looked at Heavy with interest and surprise.

'What the hell — ' said Heavy, 'I ain't — '

'Don't listen to him, men,' said Dean. 'What's he against the plan for? I'll tell you. Because he's got more than any of the rest of us and he's tryin' to hold out on us. We already voted him down and he's still tryin' to make trouble.'

'Say, you holdin' out on us, Heavy?' asked Tex.

'He's crazy,' declared Heavy.

'Crazy, am I?' said Dean. 'We're not goin' to stand much more from you.' He turned to Tex. 'Kid — I'm goin' to appoint you second in command of this arroyo.'

'Me?' said Tex.

'Want me to appoint somebody else?'

'No,' said Tex. 'What do I do?'

'Collect all the grub and we'll have a feed. Everybody's got to put in something. You see to it that everybody puts in a fair and equal amount. We'll cook it here and eat it. Don't matter if it ain't a big feed to-night. This is just a starter. To-morrow we'll really go places.'

'Okay, Dean,' said Tex. He turned to Gosh. 'What've you got?' he demanded.

'Me?' asked Gosh.

'Yes, you,' said Tex, belligerently. 'You heard what Dean said, didn't you?'

'Gosh, yes.'

'What've you got?'

'I got a loaf of bread,' said Gosh timidly. 'Part of a loaf, that is.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Anything else?'

'Some dried beans.'

'Go get 'em and be quick about it,' said Tex. 'Scram!'

Gosh got up and went down the trail toward his shack.

'Beans and bread comin' up,' reported Tex to Dean. He raised his hand in a gesture of an abortive salute.

'Okay,' said Dean, relaxing on the sand, and chewing on a leaf he had pulled from an adjacent bush.

'Christ,' snorted Heavy in disgust.

Dean ignored him.

'What've you got?' demanded Tex of Ben.

'Well,' said Ben, 'I was figurin' on eatin' a can of tomatoes myself.'

'What else?'

'I got two grapefruit.'

'Bring it out,' commanded Tex. 'Tomatoes and grapefruit,' he called to Dean who had heard the whole thing. 'Hot damn, are we gettin' somewhere!' He spat a gob of blood.

Dean lay still and chewed on the leaf.

'You comin' in on this, Heavy?' asked Tex.

'You know I ain't,' said Heavy.

Tex hesitated. 'You gotta,' he finally said.

Heavy stood up. Dean turned on his side and looked at him. Heavy spoke to the group in general. 'I'm goin' up to my shack,' he said. 'I got some salt pork and bread and coffee and I'm gonna eat it and you can all go to hell.' He turned and walked up the trail and disappeared in the chaparral.

Tex looked blankly at Dean.

'Ain't part of his stuff yours?' asked Dean.

'Half of it,' said Tex.

'Go get your half and bring it down here,' said Dean. 'That's fair.'

'Okay,' said Tex. He walked up the trail after Heavy.

Ben said, 'I got to feed Wicky. I got some old bread left over for him.'

Dean said nothing.

Ben got up and went into his shack. The rat was inside in its cage. While Ben was busy Gosh returned with his half a loaf of bread and dried beans. He put them down beside the fire pit and sat down and looked at Dean. Dean nodded silently, without speaking. It was beginning to get dark. The two men sat waiting in the twilight.

Ben came out again.

Dean said, 'I don't know about that rat. We may have to get rid of it.'

'What for?' asked Ben.

'It don't produce,' said Dean.

Tex came back shortly after that. 'I got some coffee,' he said. 'Heavy give me part of it. But he kept the salt pork. He's sore, Dean. I thought he was gonna sock me.'

Dean sat up and spat out the chewed remains of the leaf. He looked over the supply of food. 'It's workin' pretty good,' he said with quiet satisfaction. 'Now you guys stir up a fire and heat the tomatoes and make some coffee and divide up the bread in four parts. I'll be back in a couple of minutes.' He walked off into the chaparral.

Gosh got the wood. Ben opened the can of tomatoes. Tex divided the bread and struck a match for the fire. They made coffee in a can. Everything was coming along all right. It was almost entirely dark when Dean returned. He had something in each hand.

'What've you got, Dean?' asked Tex.

'The salt pork,' said Dean, tossing it down. 'Fry it.'

'What's in your other hand?'

Dean displayed the object for only a second. 'Blackjack,' he said quietly, and he put it inside his coat.

'Whew!' said Tex.

'What's holdin' us up?' asked Dean.

'Nothin' — let's eat!' said Tex.

III

Usurpation occurred on Monday night and Tuesday afternoon Virginia made her belated visit to the arroyo. She hurried through the brush as one who has been long abroad and is searching for familiar scenes as she nears her native strand. There was Gosh's house — it looked just the same — there was where the trail curved and there was Ben's house. And there was Ben!

He looked up and he saw her coming.

'Ben! Ben!' she shouted. 'Hello, Ben!'

He smiled a broad smile and held his arms wide in a gesture of amazement.

'Well — well!' he said. 'Well, well, well — I thought Virginia had gone and left me.'

She ran up to him, and there was an awkward moment when their glee was tempered by self-consciousness. For one instant it had appeared that she might run into his arms, but she stopped in front of him and smiled up at his face, and he smiled down. In the silence he almost touched her and she almost touched him. Then they both spoke at once:

'I brought a can of peas,' she said; and 'I allowed you was away some place,' he said.

He patted her shoulder and she handed him the can of peas.

'He come home that night, Virginia,' said Ben.

'I heard your whistle. I heard it both times.'

'He's in the house,' said Ben. 'Come in and see.'

They walked into the shack. And there was Wicky in the cage, and no sooner were they beside the cage than he began to run on the treadmill.

'Oh, such a bad, bad Wicky,' said Virginia, 'to run away and scare us half to death. Where was he, Ben? Where'd he come from?'

'Don't rightly know,' said Ben. 'I was a settin' out there in the dark feelin' like I lost my best friend, and first I heard somethin', but I didn't think nothin' of it 'cause I counted him dead and gone, and then I'll be switched if I didn't see somethin' movin' right there in the dark.'

'In the night time?'

'Sounds funny, but even if it was good and dark, I could *see* him a comin' home along the bushes way — Oh, 'bout a couple of feet from me — kind of sneakin' home easy-like knowin' he'd been a bad boy to run off like he done. And he pops right up into my lap and I'm so pleased to see him I got to pinch myself to be sure I'm awake.'

'Oh, Ben — Ben! Wasn't that fine!' Virginia jumped up and down and clapped her hands.

'So I says, "Right into your cage for you, and you can just stay there for a spell", and I put him in the cage and I felt kinda good about everythin' and I kinda wanted to give thanks somehow. So I walked up the trail and stood right there by your garden and I give those three whistles, toot-toot toot, like we said and —'

'I heard 'em, Ben! And I was sick, Ben, too. I was sick in bed with a cold but I heard 'em just as *plain*!'

'Twice I done it and then I figured I better not go on makin' noises like that so I come back down here allowin' as how you musta caught on if you was in.'

'I knew right away what it meant, Ben!'

'Then I got to feelin' pretty sad again the next few days be-

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

cause Virginia never came back, and Wicky and me decided maybe Virginia didn't love us no more.'

'Oh, yes I do, Ben! It was only because I was sick and I couldn't get here until to-day. But now everything's all right again.'

'Well — almost,' said Ben.

'What's wrong? Why isn't it all right?'

Ben took Wicky out of the cage and handed him to Virginia. She carried the rat outside and Ben followed her. 'It's just that things is a little different,' he said.

'I don't see any difference. What does he get for his supper to-night?'

'Here's some stale bread. You feed him. Why, there's a new fellow here and he's kinda in the front of things.'

'Oh.' She sat down on the sand and put the rat in her lap. 'Well, we don't care as long as he doesn't bother us.'

'That's just the point,' explained Ben, looking around cautiously. 'He's one of them fellows that's dead set in his ways. He figures that this-here is his arroyo to take charge of. Name's Dean.'

'Old man Dean
Crazy in the bean,'

sang Virginia. 'We don't care about him, do we, Wicky?'

Ben looked around again. 'He — he's right peculiar,' he added. 'He ain't old, and you mustn't let him hear you call him crazy. He'd act up if he heard that, cause maybe he is crazy.'

'Oh, pooh,' said Virginia. 'We'll tell Heavy to make him mind.'

'Him and Heavy don't get along. They had a argument already.'

'That's good.'

'Heavy lost.'

Virginia looked up at Ben. 'Ben, are you scared of something?'

'Well — no.'

'Then let's talk the way we used to.'

'All right.'

'Have you made anything new while I was away?'

'No. I put that treadmill together when he come home so he could run again.'

'I saw it. He never meant to stay away so long, did you, Wicky.'

'Dean don't like him,' said Ben.

'Well, we don't like old Dean, so there.'

Ben looked around the clearing.'

'What else did you do while I was away, Ben.'

'Well, nothin' really, Virginia. I allowed as to how it's gettin' on into October that maybe it'll be gettin' chilly on the Pacific slope and if it got *too* chilly I might take a walk over to Arizona.'

'Oh, Ben — you're not going away, are you?'

'It's always warm around Phoenix. I been there before.'

'Why, Ben! When everything is so nice here!'

Ben looked down at his shoes and rubbed one against the other. 'I don't *really* want to go,' he said. 'Not really.'

'I'll bring you one of Daddy's old overcoats. Then you'll be warm enough.'

'Oh, it ain't that I need a —'

'Ben!' Virginia interrupted. 'Have you used the razor set?'

'Oh — well, you see, Virginia, it — I —'

'Oh, Ben, you've never used it. I bet you shaved with your old worn-out razor.'

'Virginia, that set is so pretty I just can't make up my mind to dirty it up.'

'It's been used before. It's not new.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Yes, and some day your Daddy is gonna want it again, and *then* what's gonna happen?'

'Oh, don't be silly. If Daddy knew you he'd give it to you himself. I think I'll bring a lot of things down here. You ought to have a radio and an electric heater and some books to read, and magazines, and clothes. We can have a lot of fun fixing everything the way it should be. If I could find some way of bringing the play house down from the garden, I'd have my own house down here then. Wouldn't that be grand? I'd put it right next to your house!'

'That'd be right nice,' agreed Ben.

'And I could cook for you. I'd be just like Mary Sunshine.'

'I reckon when you're growed up you'll be every bit as fine a woman as Mary Sunshine. Every bit.'

'But you said she was the best woman in the world!'

'And I say you're the best little girl in the world — barrin' none.'

'Not even *one*?'

'Not even one.'

'Oh, Ben, I didn't know you liked me that much. I like you that much, too!'

'Why, if I had a little girl I'd a wanted her just like you.'

'No difference?'

'Not the tiniest bit of difference.'

'Oh, Ben, isn't it nice that we like each other so much?'

'Yes indeedy. It's just right.'

'Then nothing's different, is it?'

'How do you mean?' asked Ben.

'Well — for a while to-day it seemed as if things had gotten different. But that's not so except that they're better. It's just that we love each other, Ben.'

'I reckon we do,' said Ben.

'And I'm Mary Sunshine. Only I won't throw my dress in

the fire and go around without any clothes on! That wouldn't be nice.'

'Oh, no,' said Ben. 'That ain't for you.'

'And I'm not going to the bughouse either.'

'I reckon not,' said Ben.

'But we can *play* bughouse, though. Look, Ben, the bughouse will be over there. I'll escape from it and you'll be away some place and when you come back, I'll be cooking your supper!'

'Think that's a good game?' asked Ben.

'Sure it is. And Wicky can be in it, too. Sort of as if he was our child. Won't that be fun? First you've got to get a fire started. And open the can of peas I brought and I'll cook them over the fire when I'm Mary Sunshine. You know what I'm going to bring down here next? A can-opener. We need one. It's not right to open a can with that rusty axe the way you do. It's not sanitary. But anyway it'll do for to-day. Open the peas, Ben.'

Ben, swept into the Mary Sunshine game, had no choice but to comply. And after it got under way he enjoyed it. First he had to walk off into the chaparral, leaving Virginia with the small fire and a battered saucepan of peas. When he came back she was cooking them in the role of Mary Sunshine. There realism ended, and the rest of the Mary Sunshine game consisted of imagination. Details of a just-pretend value supplemented the historical facts and eventually two imaginary deputy sheriffs with shot guns arrived and the dramatized Mary Sunshine was restored to the sanctuary of the imaginary bughouse. When the game finally ended the participants, including Wicky who had played a rather nebulous part, half rat half child, rested on the sand in front of Ben's shack.

'To-morrow we'll play it again,' declared Virginia. 'I don't think anything will keep me from coming down to-morrow.'

And nothing did.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

But there was a change in the order of events which precluded any possibility of a repetition of the game. Virginia descended to the arroyo bottom shortly after four o'clock, and when she reached Ben's shack a stranger in a worn-out brown suit was sitting in the broken chair reading a newspaper. She looked at him in amazement. 'Where's Ben?' she asked.

'Hello,' Dean said. He put down the paper and stared at her. Virginia was carrying a can of beans and a can-opener. 'What have you got there?'

'Food. Where's Ben?'

'He's away.'

'Well, *where*?' insisted Virginia.

'What do you care?'

'I want to know. Where's Wicky?'

'Who?'

'Wicky.'

'Who's Wicky?'

'Our rat.'

'Oh.' Dean gave the cage a glance. 'Guess he took it with him. That was a dumb thing to do. Whose little girl are you?'

'I'm Virginia.'

'Live up there?' Dean indicated the arroyo top by raising his eyebrows.

'Yes. When is Ben coming back?'

'Pretty soon. Let's see the can.'

Virginia gave him the can of beans and the opener.

'Well, that's all right,' said Dean, putting the can in his pocket. 'Bring some beer next time you come.'

'I brought that for Ben, not for you,' said Virginia.

'Nice day if it don't rain,' said Dean.

'Oh!' exclaimed Virginia. 'Now I know who you are!'

'The future,' said Dean.

'You're old man Dean. Aren't you?'

'Cut out the old man.'

'Well this is our arroyo,' declared Virginia, 'and we don't want it changed.'

'Think of that.'

'Ben said you thought it was yours.'

'He did, did he?'

'But Ben and I have had it for a long time and we want it to stay the way it is.'

'Reactionary,' said Dean.

'What?'

'So you're giving me the works, are you. Well, listen here, little girl. You don't belong down here. If you behave yourself and bring somethin' every time you come, I'll let you keep on comin'. But if you get fresh or smart, I'll warm your bottom until you can't sit on it.'

'Oh!' gasped Virginia, outraged. 'Why, you wouldn't dare!'

'Wouldn't I!'

'I'll tell Daddy.'

'Maybe I'll tell your daddy that you come sneakin' food down here every day. He'll give you a lickin' himself then.'

'He would not!'

'So you're going to do like I say, or you're going to get in trouble.'

Virginia stared at Dean, her amazement mounting into anger.

'Is your daddy rich?' asked Dean.

'Certainly he's rich!'

'What's he do for a living?'

'He's vice-president of a bank.'

'Probably a dirty crook,' said Dean.

'He is not!' Virginia was furious.

'Economic parasite,' said Dean.

'Maybe I'll tell Daddy you called him a parrot-site and a dirty crook. Maybe I will!'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Go ahead. He oughta hear it once.'

'I wish Ben would come back. Why don't you tell me where Ben went?'

'He broke a rule of this arroyo. Now he has to pay for it.'

'What rule?'

'He welched on food and ate a can of peas that didn't belong to him. It belonged to everybody. Now he can't come back until he brings six cans back. He's out gettin' them, that's where he is. If he's not so dumb he got pinched doing it.'

'You mean he's *stealing* them?'

'Can't steal somethin' that belongs to all men.'

'Because Ben wouldn't steal anything.'

'If a man takes a can of peas you call it stealing. When your daddy's bank takes a man's house away from him that's capitalism. Go tell that to your daddy.'

'You're just the way Ben said you were.'

'How's that?'

'Kind of mad all the time, and crazy.'

'I'll teach him to keep his mouth shut. How many cars has your daddy got?'

'Two.'

'My God, think of that,' said Dean, looking at Virginia from head to heel. 'I suppose he gives you anything you want — toys, candies, anything.'

'Sure he does.'

'My God. And think of some of the kids I've seen. Why, I know a little girl, not much bigger than you, in a factory town, that has to support her whole family by sellin' herself on the street.'

'Selling *what*?'

'Herself.'

'Herself?'

'Yeah.'

'Why, how can anybody sell herself?'

'How old are you?'

'Nearly eleven.'

'Think it over a few years from now.'

'Is Dean your first name or your last name?'

'Both.'

'Dean Dean?'

'Uh-huh.'

'That's a funny name.'

'Not as good as yours, is it?'

'Oh, it's all right — but it's funny.'

'I suppose you got a private teacher that tells you anybody who hasn't got a million bucks is scum for you to spit on.'

'No — I go to public school. Lincoln Avenue. Mother says it's democratic.'

They were both attracted by the figure of Tex who came into view along the trail from the north end of the chaparral. He was in a hurry, and as soon as he saw Dean he began to speak.

'Heavy's lit out,' he called. 'He's gone.'

Dean and Virginia stared at him.

'He's vamoosed,' said Tex. 'Scrammed out.'

'Where did he go?' asked Virginia.

'Hit the road,' said Tex. 'What d'y' think of that, Dean?'

'Good thing,' said Dean. 'He was a trouble-maker.'

'You know what I think?' asked Tex. 'I think he was scared of you.'

'Uh-huh,' nodded Dean.

'Heavy was scared of *him*?' asked Virginia of Tex, pointing toward Dean.

'An' how!'

'Why, I'm not,' said Virginia, looking at Dean again. 'Is Ben?'

'Scared blue,' said Tex. 'They're beginnin' to get scared of me, too, ain't they, Dean?'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Keepin' 'em scared gets results,' said Dean.

'Say, Dean, do you think we ought to let Virginia keep comin' down here now that it's the new way?'

'No, I don't,' said Dean, staring at Virginia.

'Go on home, Virginia,' commanded Tex.

'This is Ben's place,' said Virginia. 'You can't send me home.'

'Tycoon's daughter,' said Dean to Tex. 'Sec?'

'Why, you little hell-cat — don't talk back to me,' said Tex, frowning. 'We're particular who we have around here. We're hundred percent Americans.'

'I'm an American,' said Virginia, 'and I'm going to wait for Ben.'

Tex looked at Dean.

'You asked for it,' Dean said to him.

'Look here,' said Tex to Virginia. 'Some people can't come around here and you're one of 'em. Jews and niggers and you. That's the new way. Now scram!'

Virginia sat down on the sand beside Ben's shack. 'You're awfully silly,' she said. 'This is half my arroyo. And if you don't like Jews and Negroes you shouldn't go around saying so. Maybe they don't like you either. I don't.'

Dean smothered a laugh. 'What do you say, lieutenant?'

'It's a good thing you're a girl,' declared Tex, 'or I'd sock some hundred percent Americanism into you.'

'Pooh,' said Virginia. 'We had Americanism in school to-day. We learned its basic ideal. I bet you don't even know what it is.'

'What is it?' asked Dean.

'Tolerance,' said Virginia.

'What?' asked Tex.

'We're having an essay contest on it,' said Virginia. 'The principal explained it to the assembly and then we all had to say it out loud. "Tolerance is the basic ideal of Americanism." The essays have to be two hundred and fifty to five hundred words.'

'And you'll get the prize because your old man's rich,' said Dean. 'Unless some other kid's old man is richer. God, the crap they teach in schools these days is awful.'

'I quit before they ever got any of it into me,' said Tex.

'I got an idea,' said Dean, studying Virginia.

'What?' asked Tex.

'We're going to play school,' said Dean. 'And I'm teacher.'

'I don't think I want to play that,' said Virginia.

'It's just a game,' said Dean, and to Tex he added, 'When I see a chance to sow a seed, I sow it.'

'What?' frowned Tex.

Dean spoke to Virginia. 'You've got a big play house up there in your back yard, haven't you?'

'Yes,' said Virginia.

'Well, let's suppose that play house of yours is a candy factory.'

'All right — let's suppose!'

'Now some other little girl comes into your back yard and makes the factory work.'

'You mean my play house would make candy?'

'That's what I mean,' said Dean, leaning forward and looking Virginia in the eyes. 'Now you listen to this, and you tell me what you think is fair. Will you do that?'

'Sure I will.'

'All right,' said Dean, speaking slowly and deliberately and pausing between his points. 'This other little girl — we'll say her name is Mary — Mary comes to your play house candy factory and after a whole day's work she produces a box of chocolates.'

'I wish we had some now,' said Virginia.

Tex sprawled on the sand and listened.

'After she produces a box of chocolates,' said Dean, 'you come home from the movies where you've been enjoying yourself and you say, "Oh, so you made a pound of chocolates, did you? I'll just take the whole pound for myself". Then Mary will cry be-

cause she spent the whole day makin' that candy. And you'll say, "Go on and cry, but it's my candy factory so I own the chocolates". And maybe — just maybe, mind you — if you feel like it, you might give Mary one little chocolate while you keep the rest of the pound. That is what is called capitalism. That is the result of private ownership of the means of production. Mary does all the work, but because you own the play house candy factory, you take all the profit. Mary slaved all day while you looked at Mickey Mouse, but Mary can't have the candy she worked to make. Now is that fair? Would you call that a square deal for Mary?

'No,' said Virginia. 'It's not fair at all.'

'Then what would you do if you was Mary?'

'Why that's easy,' said Virginia. 'If I was Mary I wouldn't make the candy unless I could have it.'

'Ha!' Dean looked at Tex with triumph. 'That's right. You're a smart little girl. But now listen to this: suppose Mary simply *had* to have one piece of candy every day. Suppose that Mary had a stomach that lived on nothing but candy and —'

'I wish I had a stomach like that! Don't you, Tex? Yum yum!'

'Huh,' Tex grunted.

'... and if Mary didn't get one piece of candy every day,' continued Dean, 'Mary would die. Then in that case Mary would *have* to work the play house candy factory for you even if you took all the chocolates for yourself and only gave Mary the bare one she needed to live on. Wouldn't she?'

'I guess she would,' said Virginia, seriously.

'And as for you,' said Dean, 'you'd have so many chocolates you wouldn't know what to do with 'em. That's democracy under capitalism.'

'I'd sell 'em,' said Virginia. 'I'd sell my candy for money.'

'You see?' said Dean to Tex, grimly. 'There she goes.'

'What?' asked Virginia.

'It's in your blood,' said Dean. You been *conditioned* a capitalist.'

'I'm a capitalist,' said Virginia, rolling the word with her tongue. 'Cap-i-tal-ist. I'm a capitalist, capitalist, capitalist. What're you, Dean?'

'Hundred percent American.'

'What's Tex?'

'Same.'

'What's Ben?'

'Same, but he don't know it. So's Gosh, and he's dumber yet. So's anybody who wants to overthrow the abuses of the system.'

'What's Daddy?'

'He's a lousy capitalist. He does just what you'd do. He makes other people do the work and he squeezes the life blood out of 'em and eats it.'

'Oh — he does not!'

'He ought to get ten years in a concentration camp,' said Dean.

'I'll say,' agreed Tex.

'Daddy says anybody who wants to overthrow the government should be deported.'

'Hear that?' Dean asked Tex with satisfaction. 'Already teachin' their kids to persecute us. Well, they're not goin' to get away with it. Boy, the day is comin' when we'll make that French revolution look like a Sunday school picnic.'

'Atta stuff,' said Tex.

'Now some time when your daddy is sittin' around thinkin' what small depositor or farmer or home-owner his bank can squeeze to the wall next, you tell him the story of Mary and the candy factory. Will you do that?'

'All right.'

'And if he tells you it ain't so, don't you believe him. His guts knows it's so, even if his brain won't admit it. His guts knows it, that is, if he's got any guts.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'He's got plenty of guts,' declared Virginia. 'What are guts?' 'Insides,' said Tex.

'Here comes Ben!' said Virginia. She jumped up. 'Ben — he's sitting on your chair.' She pointed at Dean. 'Have you got Wicky with you, Ben?'

Ben walked up to his shack. He patted Virginia and spoke to Dean. 'I got four cans.'

'I told you six,' said Dean.

'Just wasn't no way to get six,' protested Ben. 'Can't go walkin' out of a market with your pockets full so that anybody'd notice it.'

'Listen, stupid,' said Dean. 'Walk into a market and take anythin' little. Take yeast cakes. Put 'em in your pants pockets. Ask the clerk for somethin' he hasn't got. Then walk out. Go to the next nearest market. Tell the clerk you bought eight yeast cakes that morning and you don't need that many and you're bringin' four back. He gives you a dime for 'em. Go back to the first market and load your clothes with small cans. Buy one dime's worth of anythin', joke with the clerk and walk out. It's done every day. Nothin' dishonest in cheatin' a chain store. You don't need brains. Now give me them four cans.'

'Boy — that's slick!' said Tex.

'That's nothin',' said Dean. 'Some day I'll show you how to shake down a filling station. I got a system that'll take any one of 'em. All you need is a phoney ignition key. Only thing to look out for is that the filling station mustn't be near a garage with a tow-car. You're supposed to be lookin' for a garage with a tow-car, see? That's your first line. You work this at night.'

'Yeah? Then what?' asked Tex.

'You tell the guy your car's broke down two blocks away. Then you find you left your money in it. You show the guy your ignition key, see? Then you borrow a dime from him in order to telephone for a tow-car and as soon as you — wait a

minute.' Dean stopped and stared at Virginia. 'What're you listenin' to all this for? Goin' to go tell your daddy?'

'You sound like the crooks Dick Tracy catches,' said Virginia.

'Look here,' said Dean to Ben. 'Chase your girl friend home. We don't want her here now.'

'I'm not going home. We have to feed Wicky. This is our place. I can stay here, can't I, Ben?'

'Well — Virginia — ' Ben hesitated. 'It's like this to-day — ' he took her by the hand and they walked toward the trail. 'Let's walk along a little.'

'Do you really call a tow-car?' Tex was asking Dean.

'I don't like that Dean, Ben,' said Virginia. 'Why don't you make him stay away from our place? He spoils it all.'

'We'll see, we'll see,' said Ben softly as they walked along. 'To-day you better go on back up to your house. I'll walk a little spell with you.'

'Where's Wicky?' Virginia was walking ahead of Ben along the trail.

'He's in my shirt. He don't like those fellows any more'n you do.'

They passed Gosh's house. He was there and he stared at them and waved a feeble greeting.

'I kind of think,' said Ben slowly, 'that maybe you better stay up at your house for a couple of days until we see how things works out.'

'Oh, but Ben — I want to come and see you.'

'I know,' said Ben. 'Tell you what. To-morrow I'll come to where the street car ends and we can walk along from there.'

'All right, Ben! I'll watch for you when I get off the car.'

They came to the point where the trail went up the cliff.

'That'll be nice. You walk up to the arroyo top now.'

Virginia started up the trail. 'Good night, Ben.' He watched her as she ascended. A quarter of the way up she called down, 'He took your beans, and the can-opener.'

Ben nodded and waved her on. He stood, looking up, until she disappeared over the rim.

'Well,' sighed Ben as he turned back toward his shack. 'It looks like Arizona, young fellow,' he said to his shirt front.

Virginia walked through the garden and entered the house by the back door.

'M'm, m'm,' mumbled Celia. 'If your mother ain't lookin' for you! You're gonna catch it. An' you better tell the truth, too.'

Virginia looked at the brown face in surprise. Sitting in the kitchen, in a maid's uniform, waiting to serve, was Lizzie, Celia's niece. That meant there were guests for dinner. They never had Lizzie just for themselves. There must be a dinner party.'

'What happened?' asked Virginia.

Lizzie laughed — deep melodious laughter way down in her throat — 'I been hearin' tales about you,' she chuckled. 'My — my — tramps and rats.'

'I know who's been takin' things out of my kitchen,' said Celia. 'Go on along now. Mrs. Stewart'll take care of you.'

Virginia walked through the house. Both Mother and Daddy were in the library and she could hear Mother saying, 'Celia thought the delivery boys were doing it, but it seems she's been taking food down there every day to feed this tramp'.

Then Daddy said, 'Harmon said he saw her way out on the golf course. The tramp doesn't play golf, does he?'

'This is nothing to joke about. I haven't any idea how long it's been going on,' said Mother, exasperated. 'And by the grace of God we've discovered it before it's too late. Celia says she thinks he's an old man, but even so you can't tell what he might do to her. A dirty tramp and a filthy rat — ugh!'

'That's what Harmon asked me,' said Daddy. 'He said she was covered with mud and asked him if *he* had *her* rat.'

'When did he see her?' asked Mother.

'Several days ago — last Friday I think he said.'

'Do you suppose that is why we haven't heard from them lately? Do you suppose she was rude to him? Or said anything — ?'

'I hardly think so,' said Daddy. 'He was kidding about it, but I could see that he was surprised. Of course I didn't know what he was talking about. Well — if she's down there I suppose I'd better go get her.'

'At once,' said Mother.

Virginia walked the few remaining steps toward the library. Mother and Daddy weren't understanding, and possibly it was too late to make them see. But it was all up now and it might as well come out. There were only three more steps to the library, but they were hard to take. One — two — three.

'*Virginia*,' said Mother. 'I'm surprised.'

'We don't know what to think of you, Virginia,' said Daddy, sternly.

'After you promised Mother you wouldn't go down to the arroyo ever again. And now we find that you've been taking food and behaving disgracefully and seeing a horrible tramp and that disgusting rat.' Mother shuddered.

'You've never been punished, Virginia,' said Daddy. 'You've always had everything you wanted. Mother and I are very, very ashamed of the way you've acted.'

'You never deceived Daddy and me before,' said Mother.

'And now you've told lies,' said Daddy, 'you've broken your word, you've stolen food, and you've done all of those things knowing they were wrong and you would have kept right on doing them if Mother and I hadn't found out.'

'Now *what* have you to say for yourself?' asked Mother.

Virginia took a short breath. It was such a dreadful moment. She bit her lip and her eyes looked through a film. It was the

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

way Mother and Daddy felt — that was what cut deepest. Something way down inside you hurt because they were so hurt and disappointed and couldn't understand about Ben and Wicky. She had surprised and wounded them by doing something they never thought she would do. She hadn't been the little girl they thought she was and they couldn't understand it. And everything they said was true — every word of it — but it wasn't really the way they thought it was. She wasn't really bad; it hadn't really been telling lies; it wasn't done to deceive — it was all different. Now they must be told the part that was different — somehow.

'I didn't mean —' she began, and choked. 'I only went down there because it didn't seem to be bad. I didn't do it because — because —' She gulped and swallowed.

'Why didn't you tell Mother?' asked Daddy. 'If there was nothing wrong about it why did you deceive Mother?'

'I didn't want to keep it from Mother,' she said weakly. 'I mean — I had to go — not to be bad — but —' She caught her breath and tears began to flow and she turned to Mother. But Mother didn't welcome her. She was apathetic, and said coldly, 'Tears are not enough. You've been a very bad, deceitful girl. Mother doesn't want to touch you.'

Through her sobs she heard Daddy say, 'I think she'd better go upstairs. It's obvious we're not going to get anything out of her'.

'It's six,' said Mother. 'The Newmans will be here at six-thirty and you have to dress. The McCleans may be a little late and we won't wait cocktails.'

'Mother,' sobbed Virginia, 'Mother, I didn't want to —'

'There's no use in trying to talk to Mother now.'

'You'd better go upstairs, Virginia,' Daddy said. 'We'll try to sift this through later.'

'Celia can give her her dinner in her room,' Mother said. 'She

won't be in any condition to see people. Goodness knows maybe Jack Newman saw her wallowing in mud and playing with a tramp. I don't know what kind of parents people will think we are.'

'Virginia,' said Daddy, 'I told you to go upstairs.'

'Go into the bathroom,' said Mother, 'and wash *thoroughly* before you touch anything. Ugh!'

Virginia turned from the library, the world in a blur, gasping through her sobs she went up to her room. The very worst had happened. If only she had told them sooner. But there was no way to tell them. There never had been any way to tell them. It just had to keep on going as it did until it crashed. And that Mr. Harmon, that fat jello Mr. Harmon — he was responsible for all this. But even he couldn't have known about Ben. He only knew about Wicky. And unless Celia suspected, how could they have found out as much as they had? She found a handkerchief and dried her eyes and blew her nose, and then, on her desk, she saw the further incriminating evidence which Mother must have found and read. The theme for English composition written three weeks ago.

Virginia Stewart
English 7th Grade

T H E P E T R A T

There are children who have pet dogs, and there are other children who have pet cats. There are children who have goldfish in their homes and there are unfortunate children who have no pets at all. I have a pet rat. That is, I have half a pet rat and my friend Ben has the other half. He is brown and has long whiskers and ears and likes to gnaw things. His name is Wicky because that is short for whiskers. He lives with Ben in a cage in the arroyo bottom, and sometimes he can come out and walk all over. He likes cheese and bread and meat and honey and canned fish and vitels and almost anything he can eat. He can

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

do tricks for his food but if the trick is spoiled he can't make up his mind what to do. Then he just lies around. He won't even eat then. He has a headache and needs an aspirin. It is because he is up against an indissoluble problem.

Human beings are like rats Ben says. One time when our rat couldn't get honey out of a bottle Ben taught him to get it out by dipping in his tale and licking it. This shows that there is always an answer to every problem if you know enough. His fur is not soft but he is very smart just the same. He can go around inside Ben's shirt. Anyway a rat's fur is not supposed to be soft. He likes to run fast on the wire thing inside his cage, but best of all he likes cheese. I am very fond of my rat and I go down to see him and Ben every day.

There it lay, in all its painful details with the ironic grade A written in Material Difference's hand.

Mother was at the door.

'Have you washed yourself?'

'Not yet, Mother.'

'Virginia, you go straight into that bathroom and wash that filth off yourself. If you try Mother's patience any more I shall have to punish you and punish you severely.'

Virginia hastened to obey. When she returned to her room Mother told her to undress and go to bed and Celia would bring her dinner up on a tray. 'I'm not punishing you by sending you to bed,' Mother explained. 'We're having guests for dinner and Daddy and I want you to stay in your room. To-morrow we'll talk this whole thing over. Just now you can think about how you've hurt Mother and Daddy — if you care at all.'

With that Mother went out of the room and closed the door. Slowly Virginia undressed and got into bed. After some time she could hear voices downstairs — several voices at once, and laughter, and the chinkle-chinkle noise that the cocktail shaker made when Daddy shook it. More voices. More talk. She

thought of Ben and Wicky — and Heavy on the road somewhere — and that fresh red-headed Tex, and funny little Gosh, and that perfectly nasty Dean. But most of all she thought of Ben. He was thinking of her right now, most likely. It would be nice if he'd come up and whistle to-night the way he had when Wicky had been found. But he wouldn't because there was no reason for it. Ben couldn't know that she was unhappy.

About half-past seven Celia came in with her dinner on a tray. She knew that Celia was pleased because it had all come out. She really didn't like Celia.

'Here's a good dinner for a real bad girl,' said Celia.

Virginia didn't answer. Celia wasn't an ally or even a friend. Celia probably would have been pleased if Mother had punished her. She accepted the tray and said nothing and Celia left the room.

Virginia ate her dinner and put the tray on the floor. She reached across to the table beside her bed and found a pencil and some paper. She had *one* good friend, anyway, and *he* loved her. She could write him and tell him about how nobody understood. 'Dear Ben,' she wrote. Then it was impossible to go on. She couldn't explain it all to Ben after all. Just 'Dear Ben' — that was enough. It looked nice on the page. She repeated it half a dozen times. It was nice, just to write that much.

Well — it was too early to go to sleep. She might as well make some use of the pencil and paper. What homework was there to be done? Arithmetic? No. The essay contest? She could work on that. And maybe this theme wouldn't get her in the trouble that the one called *The Pct Rat* had done. Sitting up in bed she wrote laboriously on the upper right hand corner of the paper 'Virginia Stewart, English 7th Grade'. She thought for a moment about how to begin. Then slowly she wrote, 'Tolerance is the basic idea of Americanism'

CHAPTER VI

MARY — MARY —

I

HALF way down the stairs on her way to breakfast Virginia stopped. Mother and Daddy were talking and she heard her name.

'I know that Virginia didn't connive the whole thing,' Mother was saying. 'Celia thinks she has seen the old man crossing the lot and going down to the arroyo. Somehow or other Virginia got acquainted with him — and then this tame animal — I can see where, to a child, it would be exciting. Once she'd been down there she wanted to go again. Naturally her instinct warned her that I'd put a stop to it if she told me. And so it went on.'

'It was our fault,' said Daddy. 'We handled it wrong last night. By scolding her we made it a crime. That put her on the defensive and I doubt if we'll ever get much out of her. We should have won her confidence first, sifted it through, and then clamped down on it. Can't Celia ever remember marmalade?'

Mother rang the little bell and in a moment Virginia, on the stairs, could hear the clump-swish of the swinging door, and Mother said, 'Marmalade for Mr. Stewart'.

'Yes'm,' Celia said.

Clump-swish.

'All children love live things,' said Daddy. 'When I was a kid I had hop-toads. I remember I couldn't understand why I wasn't allowed to keep them in my room. So I'd sneak them in anyway. I couldn't have been over six. Then one day when my mother had a tea party I forgot to close the toad box and —'

'I know — I know — ' interrupted Mother. 'The toads hopped all over the house. That story has almost given me warts.'

'Oh — did I tell? — maybe I did. Toast?'

'No thanks.'

Clump-swish.

'Thank you, Celia,' Mother said. 'It's for Mr. Stewart.'

There was a moment of silence, then a clink of a spoon or a knife on a plate. Virginia took one step down the stairs and stopped again because Daddy was speaking.

'We could get her a dog. That might solve it.'

'Oh, no — I don't want a dog around the house,' said Mother. 'They're such a nuisance. She'd get attached to it and then if something happened to it she'd be heartbroken.'

'How about a cat?' said Daddy.

'I hate cats,' said Mother. 'I don't think we have to compromise and get any kind of animal.'

'Perhaps not.'

'We can settle it without doing something foolish. I'll meet her after school and we'll spend the afternoon together. We'll have a little exchange of confidences and I'll get all the details'

'Be careful how you go about it,' said Daddy. 'We put her off last night. You know how children withdraw into themselves. I know I used to, and my parents couldn't pry anything out of me.'

'We may have put her off,' said Mother, 'but it's one thing to have your child behave like a lady when she's with you and behave like a dead-end kid when she's not. Can't you remember what Ralph said exactly?'

'No — just that she was so dirty he didn't know her. And I gathered that she was a bit critical of his game, but of course I couldn't ask too much about it.'

'She's picked that up from you.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Now I've never said a word about Ralph Harmon's game in front of her or anybody else,' said Daddy emphatically.

'I've heard you say time and again that he'd never par anything but the nineteenth hole.'

'I'd like to know when I ever said such a thing?'

'You told Jack Newman that last night.'

'I suppose I took her down to the arroyo and introduced her to the tramp, too,' said Daddy.

'Edward,' said Mother. 'We mustn't get excited.'

'Which is exactly why I advocate treating this incident lightly — manœuvring it so that the three of us can talk about the tramp and the rat, and so that Virginia can see that playing with a hobo is not the thing to do and that little girls must observe a certain decorum, not only at home and in school, but everywhere. The way to handle the child mind is to appeal to its reason. Her mind can reason as well as any mind. But her values are a child's values and when they're in error they have to be re-evaluated.'

'Suppose you have a talk with her.'

'I'll do it to-night. The thing to do this morning is to discount the awful significance our knowledge of it has in her mind. She hasn't committed a crime; she's just made a perfectly understandable mistake. Last night we put her in the position of a criminal. That'll defeat our own ends quicker than anything. To-day I'm going to get in touch with the Department of Public Health and they can investigate the arroyo bottom. Probably this tramp is just some old duffer who has squatted down there. He may be harmless enough, but that has nothing to do with it.'

'And he may be a filthy, lewd, old man!' said Mother.

'We're in the wrong somewhere,' said Daddy, 'or she wouldn't turn from home to find something of interest.'

'You remember that Hickman case?' said Mother. 'We don't know *what* this old man may have tried to do to her.'

'Oh, this is nothing like that — now don't *you* get excited.'

'Oh, dear!' said Mother.

'At least we've discovered this in time,' said Daddy, 'thanks to Ralph Harmon and Celia.'

'And her homework.'

'Curious thing,' said Daddy. 'How she'd keep it from us and yet write it down for her teacher to read.'

'Do you think you'll see Ralph to-day?'

'I may see him at lunch. No — he flew to San Francisco this morning. Told me yesterday he was going.'

'Well —' said Mother — 'if we don't hear from them in a few days I'll call Ethel up.'

'Good idea,' said Daddy.

The bell tinkled again when Mother rang it, and again the clump-swish indicated Celia's entrance.

'You'd better call Virginia, Celia. She's going to be late.'

Virginia turned and went up the steps two at a time. She was back in her own room when Celia, standing at the foot of the stairs, called, 'Miss Jinya!'

'Coming!' she shouted. She came rapidly down the stairs, taking the last two at a jump and walked into the dining-room.

'Good morning, sweet,' Daddy said.

'Hello, Daddy.'

'Drink your orange juice,' Mother said.

Everything was all right. It had begun exactly like every other breakfast. Not a word was said about the arroyo or Ben or Wicky. Unless you had heard them talking you would never have known that Mother and Daddy even knew about Ben and Wicky. And that was nice. It would have been awful to have to go over it all again. This way you didn't have to think much about it. The remainder of the breakfast talk had to do with a man named President Roosevelt. Daddy said he was undoubtedly a man of the best intentions but you knew perfectly well that if Daddy were in his place he would have done things

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

differently. There was something about a thing called the S.E.C. that Daddy thought was downright unconstitutional. After the orange juice came a soft boiled egg and a piece of bacon and some toast. It seemed that whenever government meddled with business it made a mess of it.

After breakfast Daddy gave her thirty-five cents for her lunch at school — 'lunch money' it was always called — and Mother kissed her and she got her books and went out of the house and across Palm Drive to the street car line. That was the spot where Ben had said he would meet her later that day. She had forgotten to tell him to be sure to bring Wicky, but probably he would.

The meeting, however, did not materialize as Mother met her after school with the Pontiac and they drove downtown to do a little shopping and have some ice cream and finally drove home. They were turning in the drive before Mother said, 'Isn't it funny the way you got into the habit of going down to that arroyo almost every day'.

'Yes,' said Virginia.

'What was that old tramp's name?'

'Ben. Mother — he isn't a tramp.'

'Oh, wasn't he?' asked Mother as she drove the car into the garage. 'What was he?'

'A business man.'

Mother laughed and Virginia resented it.

'He's been in a lot of businesses,' affirmed Virginia. 'Mostly junk.'

'I dare say.'

'He's been everywhere.'

'Did he ever try to touch you at all?'

'No.'

'Never?'

'No — we used to talk and —' she started to say 'play with Wicky', but stopped short. Mother was trying to find out things.

Mother didn't like Ben and she didn't like Wicky, so why should she want to ask questions about them? They got out of the car. Adachi was in the garden and he touched his cap.

'Will you close the garage doors, Adachi?' asked Mother.

'Yiss,' he nodded.

They walked slowly around the garden while Mother examined the cannas. 'Dear me,' she said. 'Why can't Adachi be a little more careful.'

'What did he do?' asked Virginia.

'And just look at the rose bushes. They need trimming and pruning. He works here three days a week and I can't see that he does anything except turn the water on and off. Let's go in the house, sweet.'

Virginia followed Mother inside. She wondered if Ben were still waiting at the end of the street car line. The car she usually rode on would have come and gone, and a lot of other cars since. There was a bench near by where people waited. Ben might be sitting there now wondering why she hadn't appeared. If she were to go to Claire Ensley's house she could walk a block out of her way and go by the end of the street car line and tell Ben what had happened — provided, of course, he had been waiting all this time. She considered the possibility, but Mother said, 'I'll play you a game of hop-ching for half an hour if you'll find the board and the marbles'.

'They're up in my room.'

'Very well, we'll play up there.'

Ben was going to have his wait for nothing. There was no way out of it. Well — she could explain to him later. No, there wasn't going to be any 'later'. She wasn't supposed to see Ben ever again. Mother and Daddy had taken such a terrible dislike to Ben without even knowing him. She went upstairs and Mother followed her. They put the hop-ching board on the table and drew up two chairs. Through the french doors that

led out on to the balcony you could see the garden and beyond it the arroyo edge. By this time Ben must have gotten tired waiting and had gone back to the chaparral. He must be wondering what had happened. She hadn't been able to keep her promise and he would be disappointed. Probably Mary Sunshine had always kept *her* promises. If Ben only knew. . . .

'What colour do you want?' asked Mother.

'I'll take the red ones.'

'Then I'll take blue.'

'Shall I go first?'

'Yes, go ahead,' said Mother.

The game began. You had to keep your mind on it or you missed too many jumps. Ben and Wicky were forced back into that place-where-you're-alone. But you knew they were there and you didn't try to think of them. Right in the middle of the game Mother said, 'Where did you first see the old tramp?'

'Oh - I don't know,' said Virginia.

'Did he ask you to come down to the arroyo bottom?'

'No. Look, Mother, you missed two jumps!'

'So I did - well - it's your turn.'

'I'm going to spoil your jumps - like this. See?'

'You play a good game,' said Mother. 'Now let me see - what can I do next -'

'I see something.'

'Don't tell me,' said Mother.

'I won't,' said Virginia.

'Well, I'll move this one. He hasn't been moved much.'

'Jump - jump - jump,' said Virginia.

'You're getting that one right down where you want him, aren't you. Did the old tramp beg you for food?'

'No. I just thought he would like some. No! You can't move that way!'

'Oh, that's right,' said Mother. 'What could you and he find to talk about so much?'

'Oh — everything — his wife.'

'Has he got a wife?'

'Yes.'

'Where is she?'

'In the bughouse. It's your turn.'

'I think I'll do *that*,' said Mother. 'Now what are you going to do?'

'You've got me blocked, I guess,' said Virginia. She studied the board.

'I wouldn't use the word bughouse, if I were you,' said Mother. 'It's slang and it doesn't sound very nice.'

'All right.'

'Sometimes tramps use words that little girls should never use. Did he ever ask you for money?'

'No. Oh, I see what I can do! Look, Mother! It was there all the time and I never saw it. Jump, jump, jump, see? And that's not all, because then I go jump, jump, jump and I'm just where I want to be!'

'Dear me — I'm not getting anywhere,' said Mother.

'I'm going to win after all, Mother, if you're not careful!'

'That will never do,' said Mother. 'Let me see if I can keep you under control.'

The game went on and Mother did win, even though it looked as if she were blocked. But it was a victory by only one jump and it was so close that it was almost a tie. They started a second game and Virginia was well on the way to victory when Daddy came home.

'We're upstairs in Virginia's room,' Mother called down to him.

'I'll be up,' he said from below.

A few minutes later when he came into the room Mother

insisted that he take her place at the hop-ching board. She watched while Daddy slowly but surely lost the game. Virginia was pleased to win by such a big margin and Daddy said, 'I'd have caught up to you and won with a Garrison finish if it hadn't been for this heavy thing in my pocket'.

'What?' asked Virginia.

'In my right-hand coat pocket. It's so heavy it weighs me down.'

'Why, Daddy, what's that got to do with hop-ching? What's in your pocket?'

'I don't know what it is,' said Daddy, 'but I certainly wish I could get rid of it.'

Virginia left her chair and hurried around to him. 'Let me see! Let me see!' she shouted, anticipating a joke of some kind.

'See if you can get it out,' said Daddy. 'It's wrapped in white paper.'

Virginia plunged her hand into his coat pocket and brought out the package. 'It isn't heavy at all!' she said. 'It's a little box. What's in it?'

'I can't imagine,' said Daddy.

'Why don't you open it and see?' asked Mother.

'Is it for me?'

'It must be,' said Daddy. 'It isn't for Mother or me.'

Virginia tore the paper off immediately, leaving it in shreds, and fumbled with the lid of the box. In her excitement she couldn't open it, but finally succeeded in prying it loose after a moment. Inside, the box was lined with blue plush, and set in the plush was a small gold bracelet.

'Oh — Mother — look!' Virginia exclaimed, in a combination of awe and delight.

'Isn't that lovely,' said Mother.

Virginia took it out of the box and examined it carefully.

'It's wonderful!' she said.

'I should say it is,' said Mother. 'Aren't you a lucky girl?'

'How did you know I wanted one, Daddy?'

'I had a hunch,' said Daddy.

'What do you give Daddy for it?' asked Mother.

The question didn't need any answer. Daddy was supposed to be kissed for it. People were always supposed to be kissed when they gave you a present. And what a present! Daddy got a big kiss for that — not just a peck, but a real smack.

'Later we'll have your name put on the inside of it,' said Daddy. 'There wasn't time to-day. This is the clasp. Let me show you how it opens.'

'Where did you get it?' asked Mother.

'Walton's.'

'Much?'

'Fifteen dollars,' said Daddy.

'My — you'll have to take good care of that,' said Mother.

'I will — oh, I will!' said Virginia. 'Can I wear it to school?'

'May I,' said Mother.

'May I wear it to school?'

'We'll see,' said Mother.

'Certainly,' said Daddy. 'It's to be used. There — give me your wrist. It goes on like that. And catches there. Always be sure that the clasp is tight and you won't lose it. Doesn't that look like a young lady?'

'It's beautiful!' Virginia exclaimed. 'Wait'll I show it to Claire Ensley! I bet she'll want one. Look how it shines, Mother!'

'It's very nice,' said Mother. 'And you must be very careful with it. Daddy's given you something that most little girls don't get until they're in their teens.'

'It's something like one of yours, Mother — only smaller. I love it, Daddy!'

'That's nice,' smiled Daddy.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'I'll leave you two to your toys,' said Mother. 'We go to the Mason's to-night.'

'Oh, do we?' said Daddy. 'I'd forgotten. What's Virginia doing?'

'Celia can take her to a movie — or she can stay home. Perhaps the bracelet is excitement enough for to-night.'

'I don't care whether I go to the movies or not,' said Virginia, admiring her wrist.

'All right,' said Daddy, 'Virginia and I will stay here and have a visit for a few minutes.'

'That's nice,' said Mother, as she left the room.

'Did you and Mother have a nice day?' asked Daddy.

'Yes!'

'Did she meet you after school?'

'Yes — then we went downtown. We haven't been home very long. Oh, Daddy, I'm so pleased with my bracelet!'

'Er — ah — how was school?'

'All right.'

'And — ah — let me see — ' said Daddy.

'Don't you want to read your paper?'

'Not just now,' said Daddy. 'I thought it would be nice if we had a little talk about a few things.'

'All right! What shall we talk about?'

'Well — I think we misunderstood each other yesterday. And whenever there is a misunderstanding it should be talked over so that we are clear about all things.'

Virginia sat still and listened seriously.

'Now you know that Mother and I would never say or do anything if it weren't for your own good. We have just one desire in our hearts, and that is to make you happy. And if anything comes along to separate you from us and interfere with the happiness of all three of us, then Mother and I have to decide what is the best thing to do.'

Rushing around the room went Ben and Wicky — running hard, running fast, looking for a place to hide, quickly, before Daddy found them.

‘Yes, Daddy,’ said Virginia.

‘Now both Mother and I understand that there are some things that seem wonderfully interesting to little girls, but that grown-ups, who know more about them, realize are not wonderful at all, but are really very dangerous.’

Under the bed and out again — under the bureau — went Ben and Wicky — but there was no hiding place because Daddy was circling around and circling around getting closer and closer until . . .

‘It’s about the old tramp and the rat,’ Daddy said.

Swoop! Did he have them? Did he get them? No — no! They were safe. Safe! Safe in that place-where-you’re-alone. Thank goodness! Just at the last second, as Daddy struck from above, they had dashed into that place-where-you’re-alone and they were safe, safe, safe. Just the way Wicky would dash into Ben’s shirt front when he was frightened — so they had both dashed into the Place. Thank goodness for the Place! And there they huddled, their hearts pounding, frightened and breathless, but safe. No doubt of that.

Virginia exhaled a long breath.

‘Yes, Daddy,’ she said.

‘Now, Mother and I have always reasoned with you. We’ve never treated you like a little girl at all. And we don’t want you to have to be on your guard against us the way some children are afraid of their parents.

‘When Mother and I found you had been doing something without telling us, we were disappointed. We like to think that none of us have any secrets from each other. Can’t you see how we felt when we heard about your climbing down to the arroyo bottom day after day?’

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

Virginia nodded, and fingered the bracelet on her wrist. She gulped once.

'We understand about seeing a tame rat and wanting to feed it. But we know more about rats than you do. Rats are very dirty animals. This one may be the old tramp's pet, but that doesn't change the fact that rats are one of the worst enemies of man.'

'Are they?'

'Rats spread disease, many kinds of disease. I don't suppose little girls of your age ever heard of bubonic plague, but it's one of the very worst diseases known to man and it is spread everywhere by just one carrier, the rat. You didn't know that about rats, did you?'

'No —'

'So, you see, just to touch a rat is dangerous. The United States government has spent thousand and thousands of dollars trying to exterminate rats — trying to kill all rats. For not only do they spread disease, but they destroy thousands of dollars worth of grain and food-stuffs every year. The rat is simply a natural enemy of man. Are you listening to what Daddy is saying?'

Virginia nodded, but was inarticulate.

'Now, on top of that, we have to talk about tramps. In a way, they're just as bad as rats. They're dirty and they spread disease, too. And any man who is a tramp is no good. It doesn't matter how nice he may seem, he's no good if he's a tramp. Now this friend of yours may seem like a harmless old man, and perhaps he is, but there's something wrong with him somewhere or he wouldn't be a burden to society. Any man who willingly allows himself to sink lower and lower until he is a common hobo is either dangerous or a weakling, or both. It means he has no self-respect. The hobo is usually a thief and a liar, and honest men would be better off if he were stamped out

like the rat. All kinds of coarse and rough men, undesirables, become tramps and hoboes. Almost all of them have either been in the penitentiary or are headed straight for it. They breed crime the way the rat breeds plague. You've never seen any hoboes but this one, and you can't imagine how bad they can be. They'll commit any kind of crime.'

'I've seen hitch-hikers on the highway,' said Virginia. (And I've seen Heavy and Tex and Dean and Gosh. Are they as bad as Daddy says?)

'All hitch-hikers aren't hoboes, but most of them are. Besides stealing and robbing, the hoboes kidnap little girls and do dreadful things to them.'

'They do?' (Ben wouldn't.)

'So little girls must never have anything to do with them and must never go near them. Now, I want you to promise me that you'll never go down into the arroyo again. Will you do that, Virginia?'

'Yes, Daddy.' (Dean is probably the worst one — the kind Daddy means.)

'Mother and I aren't going to watch you every day. We know that if you say you'll do a certain thing, we can depend on you to do it. Now that I've explained to you all about rats and tramps you can understand why Mother and I were so disturbed last night. It was you we were thinking of. Will you tell Daddy now that you won't go down there again and won't have anything to do with the tramp and the rat?'

'Yes.'

'You'll never go down there again?'

'No —'

'That's the girl. Let's go tell Mother that. She'll want to hear you say it.'

They found Mother in her own room, and again they went over the details. 'I'm not going down there any more,' Virginia

said. Then Mother kissed her and Daddy kissed her, and they began to talk of other things, first the new bracelet, and then subjects that were of no moment to Virginia, and just before Celia rang the dinner chimes Daddy went downstairs to glance at the evening paper.

'Why don't you show Celia your new bracelet,' suggested Mother.

'All right — I will!'

Celia, who was about to serve the soup, paused in the kitchen and said, 'My, my, ain't that somethin' fine. M'mm!'

'It's going to have my name on the inside of it,' explained Virginia.

'That's right,' said Celia. 'You better go in to the table now.'

After dinner she and Celia went to the Neighbourhood theatre six blocks away to see two features and a newsreel and a travelogue and next week's trailers and a cartoon. It was after eleven o'clock when they got home, and Virginia went to bed. As she undressed she tried to remember if the impressive Miss Catherine Kaler had worn a bracelet at Claire Ensley's party. She wasn't positive, but she was fairly certain that Miss Kaler had shown no such jewel. When Celia turned out the light and said her habitual 'Good night and pleasant dreams', Virginia settled down in bed, wearing a nightgown and a gold bracelet. Just think how Ben would admire that bracelet if he could see it. (But now he was never going to see it. Never? That's what she had promised — never.) He would be delighted, though, if he *could* see it. Certainly he never found anything like *that* in the junk business. It really made her a young lady. It was beyond the things little girls wore. Grown-up ladies like Mother and Mary Sunshine wore bracelets. Ben had never said if Mary Sunshine had one, but probably she had. What a pleasant feeling to be grown-up! Grown-up ladies, though, didn't wear bracelets to bed. Only children did things like that — things like taking

reddy bears and dolls to bed with you. She hadn't done anything like that for a long time. Months. Years. And now she was wearing the bracelet to bed and that was probably very silly. That's what a child would do. ('Her values are a child's values and when they're in error they have to be re-evaluated,' Daddy had said that morning while she stood on the stairs. Re-evaluated. Funny word.) She got out of bed and stood in the dark, fumbling with the bracelet clasp. After a minute it slipped off her wrist and she put it on the table beside her bed. Grown-up ladies like Mother and Mary Sunshine did things like that with their jewels. They took them off and left them somewhere handy. Re-evaluated them. To think about something and do it another way, that's what the word meant.

Just a few feet away were the french doors leading out on to the balcony. Celia had opened one of them to let in the fresh air. A gentle breeze was blowing from the arroyo, over the garden, and into her room. Down there in the dark in the chaparral were Ben and Wicky. Both asleep, most likely. And up here a little girl named Virginia was re-evaluating herself to be a young lady like Mary Sunshine. She slipped out of her nightgown and stood naked for a few seconds, feeling the cool breeze on her body. Mary Sunshine used to do that. She had been a nudist, Ben said. Just like this. It did feel nice, somehow. But she mustn't catch cold the way she had before. What do you suppose Mary Sunshine did about not catching cold? Got used to it, most likely.

She tossed her nightgown over the foot of her bed and crawled back in between the sheets. That's the way Mary Sunshine would go to sleep.

The next afternoon Mother did not call for her at school. So she rode home on the street car with Claire Ensley. When they got off at the end of the line Virginia looked around for Ben. He wasn't there. Yesterday he had probably waited a

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

long time, but nothing had been said about to-day. Claire walked on toward her own house, and Virginia walked west on Palm Drive.

'Come on over,' Claire called, 'and show Mummy your new bracelet.'

'Maybe I will,' Virginia called back. 'I'll take my books home first.'

'I think mama will give us some chocolate cake,' screeched Claire as the distance between them widened.

'Swell!' called Virginia.

She walked up the drive and entered her house by her accustomed route, the back door. Celia was out, but she could hear Mother's voice coming from somewhere. And in a moment she could tell by the stop and start scraps of conversation that Mother was talking on the telephone. In the dining-room it was possible to hear all of Mother's end of the conversation as the telephone was in the front hall.

Virginia paused within the swinging door as Mother said, 'My daughter has met her first beau, Ethel, but Edward and I put a quick stop to it . . . a tramp, an old vagrant, who squatted in the arroyo bottom, a filthy dirty old man who had a trained rat. Of course, it was the live animal that *really* captivated her.'

Virginia stood still. She couldn't see Mother and Mother didn't know she was listening. It wasn't nice to listen to people unless they wanted you to. But when they were talking about you wasn't it right to listen just a little bit? Just in case they made a mistake about you and you wanted to tell them differently? Mother shouldn't have said 'My daughter has met her first beau'. That wasn't the way it was at all. What could Mother mean?

'She must have seen this old tramp two or three times before we found it out . . . Yes . . . well, that's the strangest thing, you see she must have met Ralph on the golf course that very day . . .

Oh, I'm sure she must have been *simply filthy* because she had been crawling around in the bushes . . . And I said to Edward, "I don't know what kind of parents Ralph will think we are".'

Mother laughed into the telephone, and then laughed again at something Mrs. Harmon said on the other end.

'But it just shows you how children are,' said Mother. There was no severity in her voice at all. Mother was talking as if the whole thing had become a joke that Mrs. Harmon would be delighted to hear. 'It was really the cutest thing — you know our cook kept missing things from the kitchen — canned goods, bread, vegetables . . . almost every day — and it seems that my social-minded daughter, if you please, had . . . yes! Exactly — feeding a dirty old tramp.'

Mother laughed again, and Virginia stood silently listening.

'I think she's destined for a career in relief work, Ethel . . . Oh, a decided talent for it . . . I wonder we don't come home and find a bread-line outside the house . . . Yes . . . and our guest room full of tramps waiting for dinner . . . but seriously, I'm glad Ralph understood. I wouldn't want either of you to think we simply turned her loose . . . But you're so much more understanding than most people who have no children . . . Yes, quite a problem — but a wonderful problem . . . Next week? . . . I'm quite sure we could. I'll ask Edward to-night . . .'

The conversation went on, but nothing more was said about rats and tramps. Virginia backed through the swinging door and walked through the kitchen. She left her school books on the table and went out into the garden. Grown-ups were certainly strange people. It was a good thing she had overheard Mother talking to Mrs. Harmon because now she knew what Mother really thought. Compare Mother on the telephone with Mother when she first found out about Ben and Wicky. Mother must be changing her mind. Not that Mother would

let her go down to the arroyo again — she was quite sure about that — but there were other sides to it that were not mentioned before. 'It was really the cutest thing', Mother had said. She hadn't felt that way the day before yesterday. Mother had 're-evaluated' — that's what Mother had done.

Virginia walked along the trails through the garden until she came to the arroyo edge. She bent over the hedge and looked down at the chaparral. There was no sign of life down there — no movement, no smoke, and the shacks were hidden by the bushes. She stood there for some minutes. Presently Mother came out of the kitchen door and called to her.

Virginia turned and skipped through the garden, and Mother met her part way and bent over and gave her a kiss.

'I didn't know you were home,' Mother said. She was carrying a basket and a pair of shears. 'I'm going to cut some flowers. Do you want to help, sweet?'

'I was going over to Claire's.'

'You may do that if you'd rather.'

'No — I'll cut flowers with you,' said Virginia. 'What kind shall we cut?'

'I think some chrysanthemums would be nice. Big ones, and some of those little button ones. And we can cut some asters, too.'

'Purple ones?'

'Yes, they'll be nice. And some white ones, too.'

'I can spell chrysanthemums if I do it by syllables. Can you, Mother?'

'In a pinch,' said Mother.

'If you spell by syllables,' Virginia explained, 'you can find out how to spell almost any word.'

'Can you?'

'But it doesn't make any material difference.'

'Any *what*?'

'Material difference.'

'I dare say not,' said Mother. 'Suppose you cut those three asters right there, can you reach them?'

'Oh, yes, Mother!'

'Here are the scissors. Leave nice long stems.'

They moved slowly along the path, the basket which Mother held gradually filling with flowers.

'Adachi has done better with the asters than anything else,' said Mother.

'He's a funny man — he never likes to talk,' said Virginia.

'I can't imagine that he'd ever have anything to say worth hearing,' said Mother. 'Get that one — no, sweet — beyond — there. I suppose anyone can grow asters, given enough California sunshine.'

'Mary Sunshine,' said Virginia.

'Who's she?'

'Just a name. Isn't it a nice name, Mother?'

'Mary Sunshine?'

'Yes!'

'A bit ridiculous.'

'What's that poem that begins, "Mary, Mary —"?'

'Mary, Mary, quite contrary,' said Mother, 'How does your garden grow. Don't you remember that from *Mother Goose*?'

'Oh, that's it,' said Virginia. 'How does your garden grow? With asphodels and cockleshells and six little girls in a row. I had it mixed up with Mary Sunshine. I know two Marys — Mary Contrary and Mary Sunshine. What are asphodels?'

'They're a bulb plant — daffodils and narcissus. They're all related. Now just look at that! Isn't that inexcusable?'

'What, Mother?'

'That's a gopher hole. He's a nasty rodent who lives down there and eats the roots of our flowers.'

'Oh.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'And look at *that*.'

'What?'

'Snails — three of them. I don't see how Adachi expects anything to grow. Don't touch them, sweet. We'll tell Adachi about them. Let me see — he won't be here until Monday. Sometimes I think we'd better get another gardener.'

'Isn't he any good?'

'He's careless. If he doesn't get rid of the snails and the gophers we won't have any garden at all. We'll see if Daddy doesn't think we should make a change. Cut that nice white aster over there, and then I think we'll have enough.'

They walked back toward the house, and as they passed the play house near the kitchen door Virginia remembered Dean's story of the conversion of the play house into a candy factory. That had been a story about another Mary — Mary the candy maker. So there were really three Marys: Mary Contrary, Mary Sunshine, and Mary the candy maker. But Ben's Mary Sunshine was the best.

As they entered the house Virginia saw two figures walking across the lot toward the trail to the arroyo bottom. She looked quickly, eagerly, hoping one of them might be Ben, but a second glance disclosed that neither was Ben. One wore a shabby brown suit, however, and even though the men were fifty yards away she could tell that one of them was Dean. The other one she had never seen before. Now who do you suppose he was?

II

'It's not big enough to make a test case out of,' said Dean. 'Not enough men to make up the mass.'

'Yeah?' said the stranger.

They turned into the chaparral and walked along the trail, passing Gosh's shack, to the clearing in which stood Ben's house. Both Ben and Gosh were sitting on the sand.

'The little one's a half-wit,' said Dean, pointing at Gosh. 'The old one's a little cracked, too, and has a tame rat. In the white house I showed you is a little girl who used to bring grub down to him. I put a stop to it because one phoney move toward the kid would be invitin' the California delinquency law. Too dangerous. There's a red-headed squirt here named Tex. You can take over for him while we're here. It works all right, but the scale's not big enough to carry it out. It was a good experiment, and now I want to try it in a real jungle, which this ain't.' To Ben and Gosh he said, 'This is my pal Rudabaugh. Call him Rudy.'

Ben and Gosh looked at Rudabaugh and said nothing.

'Shut up, don't talk so much,' Rudabaugh said to them. Then he laughed and said to Dean, 'How's that?'

Dean nodded.

'The little one's pure mass,' he said. 'He's about nine years old and to raise him up to ten would take a derrick. Where you from, Gosh?'

'Me?' squaked Gosh.

'Yeah — where were y' born?'

'1899.'

'Think of that,' said Dean to Rudabaugh. 'Forty years old and never had a chance. Been stepped on by everybody who has ever seen him. If he ever had a dollar you can bet your shirt some rich bastard would get it away from him in two seconds. He don't know nothin' and he's afraid of everything. Him and a million like him got to be protected by the future. He'd be in the bottom class, and there'd be some way of gettin' a few units of work out of him to make him worth feedin'. He could learn to collect garbage or clean a lavatory or sweep a

street or maybe even run an elevator, though that's goin' pretty far for him. In the new way he'd be useful to the state. The old way he'd be better off if somebody'd take him out and shoot him.'

'Me?' asked Gosh.

'Complete national social control is the answer for him,' continued Dean. 'Never put him in a place where he has to make up his mind. That's not fair because he hasn't got any mind. If it's possible to mess things up he'll do it. So all his decisions have to be made for him by the state. I'm surprised he hasn't made a pass at that little girl who kept comin' down here. That's about as close as he'd ever get to a woman.'

'Looks to me like he ain't even man enough for that,' said Rudabaugh.

'Maybe you've got something there,' agreed Dean. 'But you can see what can be done with the bottom class with a little organization. I wouldn't want 'em to multiply — just keep 'em at a level so there's enough to clean the toilets and collect the garbage. He'd be better off. As it is now he'll stay wherever he is until somethin' chases him out — no water, or no food, or if a jungle is burnt out, then he'd move on. He'll keep doin' that, livin' like a rat, until around fifty-five or sixty he begins to slip down from bein' ten years old to eight or seven or six. Finally he'll be locked up in a county nut-house for the feeble-minded, such county being whatever one he happens to be in when he goes completely dada. Well, that's him.'

He turned to Ben.

'This one ain't much better, but is more of the freak type. He could be drafted into some minor mechanical job or be made to learn a trade. He has to be told everything just like the half-wit, and is about one step higher. He's the kind that's hard to change, but once you got him under control he'll keep right on doin' his job as long as he can eat and sleep. Somebody's got

to think for him and give him orders, and once he gets into the routine he'll stay put. There's millions of him, too.'

'You been sizin' 'em up, all right,' Rudabaugh said.

'I had one fellow here who wouldn't go for it,' said Ben. 'I ran him out.'

Tex came into the clearing.

'Hi, Dean, old palsy-walsy,' he shouted. He saw Rudabaugh and fell to examining him with critical effrontery. 'Who's this mug? Some new guy?'

'This is the squirt,' Dean told Rudabaugh. 'Name's Tex.'

Tex walked up to Rudabaugh. His red head barely reached the newcomer's shoulder, but in spite of his physical inferiority his attitude toward Rudabaugh was scornful and superior. 'Gonna let him stay, Dean, or shall I give him the works?'

Rudabaugh stared at Tex.

'You three guys,' said Dean, indicating Ben and Gosh and Tex, 'start the fire and cook up the grub. I'll show Rudy the rest of the layout.'

'Hey, wait a minute,' said Tex. 'I'm second in command of this arroyo and I want —'

'Not any more,' said Dean. 'Rudy is.'

'The hell he is,' said Tex. 'I am.'

Dean and Rudabaugh started north toward the shack which had formerly housed Heavy. Tex followed, frowning and saying, 'Nobody is musclin' in ahead of me. Hey, Dean, I ain't gonna stand for no —'

'Show him,' Dean said to Rudabaugh.

Rudabaugh turned and Tex walked up to him.

'What right has this guy got to —' Tex began. But Rudabaugh thrust an arm forward rapidly, his open palm straight-arming Tex under the chin, snapping his head back and sending him sprawling on the sand. Tex's shoulders landed first, his feet and legs in the air. Then he sat up quickly, shaking his head and

feeling his chin and staring up in amazement at Rudabaugh and Dean.

'Get up,' said Dean quietly.

Tex climbed to his feet.

'Who's boss here, you or me?' asked Dean.

'Christ sake, Dean,' Tex whined, 'I ain't gonna stand for no bum's rush from this mug and I —'

Rudabaugh feinted with his left and struck Tex on the jaw with a right, knocking him down again. Tex yelled in fear and shock. He lay sprawled on the sand on one elbow and spat a mixture of blood and saliva.

'You dirty lousy bums!' he half cried.

Rudabaugh stepped toward him.

'No! No!' yelled Tex, crawling away on his hands and knees.

Rudabaugh looked down at him.

'Come on,' said Dean. He and Rudabaugh started north again and Dean called back, 'You three guys get busy.'

Gosh and Ben hadn't moved. Tex didn't get up until Dean and Rudabaugh were out of sight.

'This is all there is to it,' said Dean when they came to the shack which had once been Heavy's.

'Not much,' said Rudabaugh.

'Good place to experiment. That's all,' said Dean. 'What we need now is to try it in some place where it'll really work and have a chance to spread. Make a real organization out of it. All this here is chicken feed. Some place where we begin with about fifty men — that's what we want. You and I could go places then.'

'Know the place?'

'Over two years ago,' said Dean, 'I had a pal in New Jersey. We were all set to let her go back there, but a little trouble came up and we lit out in different directions. It was a jungle on the Raritan river outside of New Brunswick.'

'Yeah,' nodded Rudabaugh. 'I know it.'

'Everybody knows that one,' said Dean. 'Now my pal is back there or he ain't — one or the other.'

Rudabaugh nodded again.

'If he's there he's got started by this time and we could go in with him and keep it moving and spreading,' continued Dean. 'All the early work will be done. But if somethin's happened to him and he never got back, that jungle is the best place to start that I know of. Out here they get soft and lazy; back there the cold weather keeps 'em mad and you can whip 'em up easier. Why in Los Angeles a man can sit in an all-night theatre on Main Street for five cents, see a show and sleep if he wants to, come out in the morning, panhandle all day, sit in the sun, get some cheap liquor, and sleep in the all-night theatre again at night. Hundreds do it. It's soft for them. That's why you can't organize out here.'

'Yeah,' said Rudabaugh. 'There's a lot of Communists, too. They won't have none of it. I tried talkin' to some men in Fresno. "Look at what Mussolini done for Italy," I told 'em. I heard a rumblin' then but I thought they liked it. "What California needs is some black shirts," I said. I thought central California was wine and Wop country, and Mussolini would go down big. Next thing I knew they were tryin' to kill me.'

'How'd you get out of it?' asked Dean.

'I didn't. I got out of town at last, but I didn't have no pants. They kicked the ass clean off. Damn dirty reds.'

'In that house I showed you where the little girl lives,' said Dean, 'they've got two cars. I've looked it over and it's a set-up. Tycoon and his wife go out at night. Nigger servant takes the little girl to the movies. Nobody home, see? They have a private police inspection once a night but that don't amount to a damn. He comes around on a bicycle with a flashlight and leaves a card on the front door and rides away again. He's dressed like an officer and the tycoon pays for it.'

Rudabaugh laughed.

'Now there's always one car left in the garage,' said Dean. 'Everybody's gone by eight o'clock. We take the second car. Tycoon don't come home until midnight or later so we got four hours start before it's a hot car. Fifty miles an hour means two-hundred miles. We'll do better than that. We can be out of California before the car is hot.'

'Could make Phoenix,' agreed Rudabaugh.

'Hell — could make New Jersey,' said Dean.

'When do we start?' asked Rudabaugh.

'The first night it sets up,' said Dean.

'Okay,' said Rudabaugh.

'Let's go back and eat,' said Dean. 'If those guys haven't got any grub ready you can hurry 'em up.'

They walked back through the chaparral.

III

Virginia had a full week-end. Saturday afternoon she went with Mother to the Community Playhouse to see *Hamlet*. At first she didn't like it, but as the play progressed and Mother explained it she felt very sorry for poor Hamlet. Ophelia, however, wasn't half as nice as Mary Sunshine and twice as peculiar. If they put you in the bughouse for going around like a nudist they should *surely* put you in the bughouse for talking gibberish and sticking flowers in your hair and throwing yourself in a lake. The king was a nasty man, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were mean and horrid. Horatio was the only real friend Hamlet had, and that rickety Polonius couldn't tell his son half as much about life as Ben could. The ghost made you feel creepy and some of the children squealed, but she knew it was only an actor. The grave digger was supposed to be a funny man, but he wasn't

in it with Uncle Boojum. All in all, though, it was worth seeing once. Shakespeare wrote it.

Claire Ensley had been invited to be Virginia's guest for dinner and for the night, and that was fun, too, because after they went to bed they could talk in loud whispers. Virginia told Claire all about Ben and Wicky and Mary Sunshine now that it wasn't a secret any more. Claire was interested, but she was afraid of tramps and she admitted she would be scared to go down to the arroyo bottom alone — or even with Virginia, for that matter.

'Pooh,' said Virginia. 'I wasn't. They're just like anybody else.'

The Mary Sunshine part made Claire giggle so loud that Mother came in and told them it was time for little girls to go to sleep. After Mother had gone out again, Claire whispered, 'Didn't she wear anything? Not even one single *stitch*?'

'Not a *stitch*,' whispered Virginia, 'and she was one of the finest women in the world.'

Claire giggled again.

'When I grow up I'm going to be just like her,' whispered Virginia.

Claire had to stuff part of the pillow in her mouth to keep from giggling. Virginia enjoyed a feeling of deep satisfaction. Once she too had giggled when Ben first told her about Mary Sunshine. But now she knew better. Mary, Mary, quite contrary — Mary the candy maker — and Mary Sunshine.

'What did your mother say when she found out about it?' whispered Claire.

'She only knows about Ben and Wicky,' whispered Virginia. 'She doesn't know about Mary Sunshine and the rest of the tramps.'

'Was she mad?'

'Kind of — at first. Then she re-evaluated.'

'What?'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Changed her mind.'

'How?'

'She thinks it was the cutest thing but she doesn't know I know it.'

'But you can't go down there any more, can you?'

'No. They'd be mad again. I promised. They'd be awful mad if I broke my promise.'

The whispers were getting unconsciously louder, reaching stage proportions.

'Did you get punished?' asked Claire.

'No, I got a bracelet,' whispered Virginia.

'Gee, you have nice parents,' whispered Claire.

'They're modern,' whispered Virginia. 'Are yours?'

'Not like that.'

'Oh, say!' whispered Virginia, 'has your cousin got a bracelet?'

'Cathy?'

'Yes.'

'I don't know. Why?'

'It doesn't make any material difference.'

Claire began to giggle, and again she had to resort to stuffing the end of the pillow slip in her mouth.

'What's so funny?' whispered Virginia.

'I was — just thinking —' gasped Claire between stifled chortles, '— how funny — Material Difference would look if she dressed — like Mary Sunshine.'

Then they both squealed and giggled until Mother had to come in again.

'What's going on in here?' asked Mother.

Daddy called to Mother: 'Ask them if they've heard the one about the travelling salesman and the farmer's daughter.'

Both Claire and Virginia giggled at that, but they didn't know why.

'Now if I hear any more of this,' said Mother, 'there's going to

be trouble. You'll have to go sleep in the guest room, Virginia.'

'We'll be quiet, Mrs. Stewart,' whispered Claire.

'We'll be quiet, Mother,' whispered Virginia.

'It's not quiet I want,' said Mother. 'It's sleep. Now you be good girls. Good night.'

'G'night!'

'G'night!'

Mother went out and closed the door.

'Maybe if I got up,' whispered Claire, 'and smashed a window, they'd give me a bracelet, too.'

This brought on a series of choked and throttled convulsions, but eventually they could wring no more humour out of it and finally went to sleep.

Sunday, too, was a busy day, for it had been arranged that Virginia would be Claire's guest. After breakfast they went to the Ensley house and Mr. and Mrs. Ensley took them to the beach club for the afternoon. It was eight o'clock Sunday night before Virginia was taken home and good-byes were said and for all practical purposes the week-end was over. Virginia went to bed and read *The Ugly Dachshund* until it was time to turn out the light.

Monday began like any other Monday. Mother called her as usual and she dressed and had breakfast and went off to school. It was during study hour when the classroom was quiet and the regular tick-clunk of the minute hand of the clock, jumping into a new position every minute, was the only loud noise in the room (and as that tick-clunked every minute you never noticed it) that she vaguely recalled having dreamt the night before. It had been a positive and real dream and now it was lost in a fog of hazy memory. The garden was in it. Something about the asters — and sunshine — and growing things — How had that been? It was funny about dreams. Unless you went over them in your mind, as soon as you woke up, you forgot them and it was almost

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

impossible to recollect them. But at the time it had been a *wonderful* dream and it had carried a sensation of pleasure because — because — what *had* that been about? Garden, asters, play-house and — *Ben!* That was it! Ben was in it. Not only was he in the dream, but he was in the garden doing something to the asters. Of course! He loved asters and he could spell *chrysanthemum* by syllables. Wicky had come up from the arroyo to chase the gophers and the snails away. Ben was working in the garden. He had an old battered Ford full of garden tools. It was Adachi's Ford but somehow it belonged to Ben.

Tick-clunk.

He was working in the rich earth and all the flowers were growing because of the California sunshine. It was really Mary Sunshine but only she and Ben knew it. Ben knew just what to do with the trowel and the hoe and the rake and the hose and the sunshine. He was busy every minute and so was Wicky. And Mother and Daddy came walking through the garden and were simply delighted with the way things were growing. Daddy stopped and knocked on the door of the play house and Ben opened the door (Why, he *lived* in the play house!) and Daddy said it was well done and Ben said yes indeedy but it would look even better pretty soon. And Mother told Celia that Ben must always have plenty to eat, and he never left the garden but kept on working until he had made a whole forest of flowers out of it, some as high as the house itself.

Tick-clunk.

It had been a lovely dream. There was a lot more to it, but it was impossible to remember it all. The important thing was that Ben had charge of the garden and lived in the play house. And why couldn't he? The play house wasn't very big, that was true, but it was just about as big as the house he had now. And why couldn't Ben be the gardener? Mother didn't like Adachi and she had said something about getting a new gardener. Why

couldn't the new one be Ben? That would solve everything — Ben's trouble, her trouble, the gardener trouble. Maybe Ben didn't know how to garden, but he could learn. It didn't take any sense. Mother said about all Adachi did was turn the water on and off. Ben could do that, and a lot more than that. It was a great idea and it might solve everything. It *would* solve everything!

Tick-clunk.

What time was it? Almost three o'clock. Pretty soon she'd be on her way home. The whole idea was exciting and the remaining half hour crawled along like a snail — a garden snail of the kind Wicky and Ben would soon be chasing out of the asters. Why hadn't she thought of this before? It was so simple anybody would have thought of it. That was the way with great ideas, Daddy said. The simpler they were the harder they were to think of.

Three o'clock.

Material Difference would talk about American history for half an hour and then she'd be free to hurry home and get this great plan started. She listened to an explanation of the difficulties encountered by Martin Van Buren during his term of office but she remembered very little about them. He had been president after Andrew Jackson. Do you suppose either one of them could garden?

From the end of the street car line she skipped along Palm Drive. Martin Van Buren and Andrew Jackson were forgotten. The man of the hour now was Adachi. This was one of his days. Yes — his battered Ford was in the drive and he was squatting down on his heels hacking away at the canna stalks. A glance at the garage showed that Mother was home because her coupé was in.

'Adachi, can anybody be a gardener?'

'Yiss,' he said.

'Do you have to learn it?'

'No,' he said.

'Don't you get tired working for us?'

'Yiss,' he said.

'That's good. Because I think we'll get another gardener.'

He stopped hacking and looked up at her.

'No like?' he asked.

'Oh, yes — we like you. We might even keep you for a while until Ben learns all the things you're supposed to do.'

Adachi sat back on his heels and frowned slightly. 'Mr. Stewart no like?'

'Sure — but we're thinking of making a change. You go on working — we're not going to change to-day.' She walked to the rear and looked down into the chaparral. The next thing was to tell Ben the good news. And that was going to be hard to do. She couldn't go down there and tell him. She had promised not to do that. In the old days it would have been so easy. Why hadn't she thought of this weeks ago? My, that was dumb. She stared below.

Adachi frowned. His work must be unsatisfactory. He'd better be a little careful. Miss Virginia must have heard Mr. and Mrs. Stewart talking about him. It didn't sound like a joke. She seemed to mean it. He'd better do an extra fine job to-day. Maybe take Mrs. Stewart in some flowers. Might see. Maybe so. He returned to the cannas.

Virginia stayed in the garden until it began to get dark. She bounded back and forth between the playhouse and the rear hedge, and she kept a close watch on the path across the lot. But nobody appeared. Oh, yes — a stranger — a shabby looking man — went by once and went on down the trail. He gave the house a long look as he went by. He didn't count.

Of course it would be possible to go into the house and lay the whole thing before Mother. That was one way. But that was

dangerous. If Mother didn't like the idea at once, she wouldn't listen to it, and to have told her would do more harm than good. To tell Daddy, too, might result in a failure. The way to do it was to keep the careless work of Adachi in their minds, have a talk with Ben about it, and then have Ben ask Daddy for the job. Ben was the key to the whole thing. He'd have to do it himself after she told him how.

'My, but Adachi's careless,' Virginia said at dinner.

'What's he done now?' asked Daddy.

'Oh — he sat down right on a lot of flowers,' said Virginia.

'Really?' said Mother. 'He was unusually polite to-day. Just before he went home he came to the back door and gave Celia some lovely zinnias for me. Those are some of them on the table. And he sent in a message wanting to know if everything was all right.'

'Must be Japanese New Year,' said Daddy.

'What did you tell him?' asked Virginia.

'I told Celia to tell him everything was all right.'

'You *did*!' Virginia was shocked.

'Why, certainly,' said Mother.

'But don't you want to get another gardener?' asked Virginia.

'Not especially,' said Mother.

'But — Mother — !'

'Eat your dinner,' said Mother.

'Oh, but I think we ought to get a *new* gardener!'

'What's poor Adachi done to you,' asked Daddy, 'that you want to cut his head off?'

'But, Mother — you said the place was *full* of snails. And the other day we found a great big gopher hole.'

'That's why gopher traps were made,' said Daddy.

'If the snails don't go away I'll tell Adachi to spread some poison,' said Mother. 'Eat your dinner, darling. You know you like turnips the way Celia fixes them.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Well —' said Virginia. 'I think our garden is the worst looking garden in town.'

'I'll get you a rake and a hoe,' said Daddy, 'and you can improve it.'

'Why, the Ensley's have a much better garden than we have,' declared Virginia. 'They have an American gardener. Mrs. Ensley says they're much better than Japanese.'

'Ralph's back from San Francisco,' said Daddy.

'Did he fly back?'

'No. Train.'

'Luther Burbank was an American,' said Virginia.

'So are a hundred and twenty million others,' said Daddy.

'Are you having gardening in school?' asked Mother.

'No — just for dinner,' said Daddy.

It was no use. They wouldn't be serious. They didn't even want to talk about it. She dropped the subject. But she wasn't going to give it up. She wouldn't *think* of doing that. The only thing to do was to find some way of seeing Ben and have a talk with him. He might have some ideas of his own. Or something might happen to Adachi. If he fell off the arroyo cliff he couldn't garden for a while, could he? But Adachi never went near the cliff. It was quite a problem. She ate her turnips and listened to Mother and Daddy's conversation without paying much attention to it. There was some way to fix this. There *must* be. She would find the way.

But the way was not easy to find. The promise blocked her. The one hope was to wait and watch after school — watch from the end of the street car line, and wait in the garden in order to get a glimpse of Ben. Monday there had been no sign of him. Tuesday there was no sign of him. Somebody was down there, though, because a thin wisp of smoke curled up from the chaparral late in the afternoon. It came from a point that was unmistakably the location of Ben's house. Why didn't Ben come up? Wasn't

he ever going to use the trail across the lot any more? Possibly he came and went by the trail down the arroyo toward the Rose Bowl and the Colorado Street bridge. Could it be that he was never coming up this way any more? Ben! Ben! Why can't you understand? Please come up, Ben. Mary Sunshine — make him come up!

Tuesday night Mother and Daddy were out for the evening and Virginia remained in with her home-work and Celia. Her English assignment called for the writing of a model letter to a friend who lived in a distant city. She wrote, instead, a letter to Ben, telling him how she missed him and Wicky and how lonely she was. She explained about the garden and how he could become their gardener. Then she put the letter aside and wrote another one. In the second letter Ben was in a distant city and she was writing in order to tell him that if he came to Pasadena Daddy would give him a job taking care of the garden and he could fix up the play house and live in it. The second letter was better. The first one didn't fit the assignment, but the second one was good enough to hand in to Material Difference. She folded the paper and wrote on the outside 'Virginia Stewart, English 7th Grade, Letter to a Friend'. She ought to get an A for it. She was sure there were no mistakes in it.

Celia had been sitting near by darning socks but presently she stood up and peered out the french doors. The light in the room made it impossible for her to distinguish anything below in the garden.

'What's the matter?' asked Virginia.

'Thought I heard somethin' movin' down there,' said Celia.

'Who?'

'Can't see nothin' at all,' said Celia.

'Let's turn out the light and go out on the balcony,' said Virginia.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'If there's somebody prowlin' around the garage, I ain't goin' to stick my head out,' declared Celia. 'Let 'em prowl.'

Virginia stood beside Celia and together they tried to peer out of the lighted room.

'Maybe jest a dog smellin' around,' said Celia. "T'ain't nothin' for you to get scared about.'

'Ho! I'm not scared,' said Virginia. And with good reason. For if there were anybody prowling around the garden she had a good idea of whom it might be. Ben might have come up in the security of the darkness. He was probably wondering what on earth had happened to her — why she had not met him at the street car line last week as they had planned and why she had suddenly stopped coming down to the arroyo bottom. He wouldn't be able to understand. Probably he was worried and thought she was sick in bed. If so, she wanted him to know better. And if it was Ben down there in the darkness there was one way to let him know that while things were not what they used to be, she was all right. They had a signal and that signal had worked before. Possibly Ben was down there wondering about it and waiting for it.

'I'm going out on the balcony,' she said to Celia. 'You better stay in here.'

'You be careful what you do,' said Celia. 'Don't lean over the rail.'

'I couldn't fall over,' said Virginia. 'And even if I did I couldn't hurt myself.'

'You come right back in again,' said Celia.

Virginia opened one of the french doors and stepped outside. The balcony was about ten feet in length and three feet in width and had a railing around it almost as high as her chest. She leaned over the rail and looked below into the darkness. There was a half moon rising in the east and after a few seconds its light enabled her to distinguish the general contour of the garden ten

feet below — vague dark strips that were the paths, the dark form of the surrounding hedge, and over to the left the whitish mass of stucco that was the garage.

Resting her elbows on the cold wood of the railing she whistled the first three notes of the chorus of *Over There*.

No answer. Silence.

'You better come inside,' called Celia.

Once again — 'O-ver There'. She couldn't have said so for sure, but she thought a vague form disappeared around the corner of the garage into the darkness where there was no moonlight. It could have been Ben. It didn't whistle back. But even so, it might have been Ben, understanding, and going home.

'Miss Jinya, please come inside,' called Celia. 'T'ain't no place to go makin' music.'

Virginia turned from the balcony and went back into her room. Celia closed the door.

'Did you see something down there?'

'No — not a thing. I think you were right, Celia. It was a dog smelling around.' (Dog, nothing! It was almost certainly Ben! How nice of him to have come up to see if she were all right.)

'Maybe so,' said Celia, 'but I don't like the feel of it. I think I'll go downstairs and turn on the outside flood lights until Mr. and Mrs. Stewart gets home.'

'Oh, you don't have to do that!' said Virginia. (Well — yes — let her do it. It couldn't do any harm because Ben would be half way down the trail before she could get the lights on.) 'If you're scared there are some crooks out there like the Green Hornet on the radio maybe you'd better go turn the lights on.'

'I aim to,' said Celia, seriously.

She went downstairs and snapped a switch in the front hall illuminating the front yard and the drive, and then walked through the house to the back porch where a switch controlled

a flood light for the rear garden. Once both outside lights were on Celia felt better. She went back upstairs and said, 'It's bed time for you anyway.'

'That clock's fast, Celia!'

'No — it ain't fast. It's slow.'

They went through the familiar routine, and when all the usual excuses had been nullified, Virginia undressed and went to bed. She was asleep long before Mother and Daddy came home and she didn't even hear them come in. Mother woke up Celia to inquire about the outside lights and Celia explained that it was only a precaution against prowlers. But when Mother and Daddy discovered that neither Celia nor Virginia had seen any prowlers, the incident was forgotten.

'I guess it was a dog,' said Virginia in a sleepy voice to Mother who was bending over her.

'Then go back to sleepy-bye,' said Mother, giving her a kiss. That was Tuesday.

Wednesday brought no further development in the Ben-for-gardener campaign. The exercise 'A Letter to a Friend' did not get an A but a B. Miss Roberts explained that the friend in the distant city should have been written to as a personal friend, and not instructed into the matter of acquiring employment as a gardener. Virginia did not protest, but apparently here was one instance in which Miss Roberts could find something that *did* make some material difference. Claire Ensley had written a conventional letter and had received an A. Well — Virginia would get an A on the next exercise, no doubt.

Wednesday afternoon Mother was at El Encanto Country Club for the bridge tournament and Adachi was in the garden. It was aggravating to come home and find him digging and watering when it was Ben who should by all rights be doing it. With Celia busy in the kitchen and Adachi busy in the garden and neither Mother nor Daddy at home, it was tempting indeed

to step over the hedge and hurry down the trail. In only a few minutes, a very few minutes, she could be at Ben's house. And how delighted they would be to see each other after a whole week! But she had promised. Mother and Daddy expected her to keep that promise. And she intended to keep it. But at an opportunity like this it was no easy thing to do. There was the hedge, and beyond it was the cliff and the trail — no — no, she mustn't think about that. It was too much of a temptation. She'd better go in the house. No — if she went in the house Ben might cross the lot and she'd miss him. Better stay out here. But not too close to the trail. Why was it like this? Why were things all wrong this way? What *could* she do about it? What would somebody else do in her position? What would Mary Sunshine do?

The sun went down and she gave up the afternoon as hopeless and went in the house. Daddy's paper was waiting for him in the living-room. There was a little girl's picture on the front page. She was a year or so younger than Virginia. Aged nine, it said. Jo Anne Stevens was her name. That was a nice name — Jo Anne. She turned to the funnies. They weren't very funny. Before she finished them Mother's coupé came up the drive and she dashed out and met Mother at the garage. They returned to the house together and Mother told her about the bridge party at El Encanto Country Club, but she had forgotten to bring her the favours.

'I'm so sorry,' said Mother.

'Oh — I don't care,' said Virginia.

'They weren't very good this time anyway,' Mother explained.

'Did you win?'

'No — I was runner-up,' said Mother.

It was interesting. To be runner-up always sounded more exciting than to be winner. There was something athletic about it — runner-up. She always pictured Mother crouched, ready to

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

break into a sprint. Runner-up didn't mean as much as winner, but then lieutenant was a nicer word than captain. Sometimes there was more to a thing than just winning.

'You going out to-night?'

'No, sweet, Mr. and Mrs. Hilton are coming in.'

'Don't you see the Harmons any more?'

'Why, yes, of course. We're going to see them next week. Why?'

'I just wondered.'

Daddy came home a few minutes later. He sat in the living-room and read the evening paper. Mother and Virginia went in to see him.

'What do you suppose,' he said, 'has been living right under our garden?'

'What?' asked Mother.

'A veritable hobo jungle.'

'A jungle?'

'That's what tramps call a squatting place. I had a report from the Department of Public Health to-day and there are half a dozen vagrants living down in the arroyo bottom.'

'Great heavens!' said Mother. 'What are they going to do about it?'

'There's a way to get rid of them,' said Daddy. He gave Virginia a look. She was listening, poker-faced.

'Why, darling,' said Mother to Virginia, 'did you know there was more than one tramp down there?'

'Oh — I saw some others,' said Virginia.

'But you never told Mother that before.'

'Well — I hardly ever saw them. Only once or twice.'

'I'm certainly glad we found it out,' said Mother.

'Incredible,' said Daddy, glancing at the newspaper. 'Right here in the heart of Pasadena. And if it hadn't been for Virginia there's no telling how long or how many of them would have

congregated down there. I suppose it was a very snug little hide-out — absolutely isolated, warm and protected, and yet right in the heart of a residential district.'

'Think of the sanitary conditions,' said Mother. 'Goodness! What's the Board of Health going to do?'

Daddy looked up from the newspaper. 'They'll — ah — take the proper steps to alleviate the — ah — condition,' he said. He looked at Virginia. 'It's nothing serious. They won't hurt the tramps.'

Virginia showed no especial interest in the conversation. Mother was the only one exercised. 'I hope they do something about it at once,' she declared. 'We can't have that going on.'

'No, we can't,' agreed Daddy. 'Listen to this: "Child missing. Jo Anne Stevens, aged nine, has been missing from her home for twenty-four hours —" and then it goes along, blah-blah-blah, and then it says, "Last seen in the company of an unidentified man, probably a transient, on Redondo Boulevard."'

'Poor little thing's probably been kidnapped,' said Mother. 'Are the parents wealthy?'

'No — the father's a grocery clerk in Inglewood. So it's not a ransom case.' Daddy turned to Virginia. 'But you see, sweet, how dangerous it is to have anything to do with tramps? That little girl's parents may never see her again.'

'Yes,' said Virginia quietly.

'And while we know nothing like that is going to happen to you, nevertheless, the tramps have got to go.'

'Where will they go?'

'Oh — just — keep moving on somewhere.'

'Who cares where they go,' said Mother, 'as long as they get out?'

'When will they get out?' asked Virginia.

'Oh, in a matter of a few days,' said Daddy casually. 'It has to be done systematically.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

She didn't ask any more questions about it, and Mother and Daddy changed the subject. Mother suggested that she run upstairs and wash her hands before dinner. She went slowly, thoughtfully, and before she was half way up the stairs she knew that Mother and Daddy had begun talking about the tramps again. She didn't stop to listen, but continued on to her room. Things had come to a pretty pass. Ben would have to move. Most any day now. Daddy had said nobody would hurt the tramps. Could she be sure of that?

She went to the bathroom and mechanically washed her hands. It was a very serious problem. Something was going to happen. Something would have to be done about it. Did Ben know anything about it yet? She hadn't seen him for a week, but then she was sure he had come up to the garden last night and heard her signal. Nobody else would bother to come up to the garden at night like that.

When you were faced with a problem you *did* something. You had to find some way to solve it. But you had to do it with sense — not just butt your nose against it, like Wicky and the honey bottle, until you had a nervous breakdown. You had to find the way to get the cork out. Then there wouldn't be any problem. So there must be some way to solve this. But where was the cork? The wisest man in the world would know. So would the wisest woman. So would Mary Sunshine. Where was the cork?

IV

Twenty-four hours later all forces converged and the crisis was reached. And the person who had most to do with it was a person who had never heard of Ben or Wicky and who had never been down in the arroyo and who was no party whatso-

ever to the circumstances. It was Miss Jo Anne Stevens. Virginia saw the headlines and skimmed over the gruesome details, interested only casually, and not attaching, at first, any relative significance to the tragic fate of Miss Jo Anne Stevens with her own immediate problem. She was mildly surprised at Mother's horrified reaction to the newspaper. All of that had happened in a suburb called Inglewood, miles away on the other side of Los Angeles, and all the people were strangers. Odd how perturbed Mother had become. People got killed in automobile accidents every day and Mother never even bothered to read about them. You might think this had happened across the street. Oh, of course, when you looked at the paper you could see that a lot more had been printed about it than there is printed about the daily accidents — and pictures of the girl's parents and the house she lived in, and a picture of the ravine and a drawing of a man who was wanted by the police and who was supposed to look something like the picture in the paper. It was startling, in a way, but it had nothing to do with Ben and Wicky and the arroyo until Daddy came home. He had another paper. An extra. It seemed that they had caught the man.

'Who's "they"?' asked Virginia.

'The police, darling,' said Mother. 'What a sickening case.'

'He was a transient who lived in a shack near the school yard,' said Daddy.

'Think of those parents,' said Mother. 'How they must feel.'

'This is going to start a clean-up campaign the like of which Southern California has never seen before,' said Daddy, putting down the paper.

'It's about time,' said Mother. 'Just think what a close call we had with Virginia. Why, it isn't safe to let your children out of your sight. What'll they do to this man?'

'Oh, he'll go to the gallows,' said Daddy, 'unless a mob of citizens gets him first. Save the State some money if they did.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

Mother reached out and pulled Virginia close to her. 'Darling, darling,' she said, 'my poor little Virginia.'

Virginia wondered what there was about her that was poor.

'Every hobo jungle in Los Angeles County is going to be wiped out,' said Daddy. 'I had Fletcher on the phone to-day. And he gave me his word that he'd start with this one right here in the arroyo.'

'Thank goodness,' said Mother.

'It was coming anyway, but this horrible case has hurried it up. The first thing to-morrow morning a crew of men will go in there with gasoline torches and axes and they'll smash the shacks and set fire to the chaparral and drive the hoboes out. They'll level the place and there won't be a stick left standing.'

Virginia listened, open-mouthed.

'When everything is burnt to a crisp they'll take a couple of tractors in there and plough the land up so that the underbrush won't grow back. It's a fire hazard and a sanitation hazard and a child hazard the way it is now. But it'll be a blazing inferno to-morrow morning.'

'That's a relief,' declared Mother. She continued to hold Virginia close to her.

'But, Daddy!'

'Yes, my sweet?'

'What about the men who live there?'

'They'll run like rats,' said Daddy, 'when they see what's going to happen. Or — they can stay there and be burnt to death and nobody would care.'

'Oh — but — what if they don't know in time!'

'Now, now, darling,' said Mother, 'you mustn't worry over something that is no concern of yours. Hoboes expect to be driven away every so often.'

'But Daddy said they might be burned to death!'

'I'm afraid they won't,' said Mother.

'They'll scurry out,' said Daddy. 'Don't you give them a thought.'

'We'll talk about something else,' said Mother. 'You tell us about something interesting that happened to-day.' And to Daddy she said, 'I'm so glad you talked to Fletcher. What a relief.'

Fletcher? Who was Fletcher? But what did it matter who was Fletcher? What mattered was Ben and Wicky. Mother and Daddy and Fletcher wanted Ben and Wicky burned to death! And it was going to happen! 'First thing to-morrow morning,' Daddy had said. What chance would Ben have? Ben would be asleep in his little house and all of a sudden the gasoline torches would turn it into 'a blazing inferno'. He would wake up and all around him would be flames. He'd try to find Wicky and dash out of the house. But the smoke would choke him and the flames would burn him and he'd die, writhing in agony in the midst of the fire, calling for help while the policemen stood around and poured gasoline on him. She remembered the way Material Difference explained about Joan of Arc. Instead of the Maid of Orleans in the flames it would be Ben trying to hold Wicky above the fire, struggling to the very last until the flames burned them both screaming to death.

'Oh — Mother!' gasped Virginia.

'Why — it's nothing, darling,' said Mother. 'Nothing at all.'

'Nothing at all!' cried Virginia. Nothing at all to be burned screaming to death while policemen stood around and laughed. 'Nothing at all!' She burst into tears and turned and ran out of the room and upstairs. At the same moment Celia announced dinner.

'Well!' exclaimed Mother in amazement. She looked at Daddy and asked, 'Now *what* do you make of *that*?'

Daddy looked at her, concerned but helpless.

'Well, I'll have to go speak to her,' said Mother. 'We can't allow *that* to go on.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Better be careful,' said Daddy. 'There's more to this than we realized.'

'Why, she's never created a scene before in her life,' said Mother. 'I'll be right down.' She found Virginia lying face down on her bed, crying into the pillow.

'Virginia,' said Mother, firmly.

'Don't touch me,' sobbed Virginia into the pillow. 'Don't come near me.'

'Very well,' said Mother. 'Since that's how you feel. When you get control of yourself, bathe your eyes and come down to dinner.' When there was no response she asked, 'Do you hear me?'

Incoherent gurgles and a nod of the head indicated that Virginia had heard. But she hadn't made any effort to get up when Mother left the room and went down to dinner.

'Miss Virginia will be late,' Mother said to Celia.

At dinner they talked of the activities of the Civic Opera Committee of which Mother had recently been made chairman, and a dinner party given by the Hilton's, and the feasibility of driving into Los Angeles next week to hear John Charles Thomas because he was one of the few concert singers Daddy liked. But they gave little attention to the conversation, and Celia finally directed the trend of thought by asking, 'Is that child comin' down for her dinner?'

'I — don't know,' said Mother.

'We got her favourite dessert,' said Celia. 'Deep dish berry pie and ice cream.'

'Suppose you go up and tell her, Celia.'

'Yes'm.'

'I thought,' began Daddy, 'that she had forgotten all the tramp business. It's been almost two weeks and you've taken her places and the little Ensley girl has been here — but apparently it goes a lot deeper than we thought it did.'

'I never thought we'd raise a problem child,' said Mother. 'How *can* she be so concerned over that awful old man?'

'Don't mention it in front of her,' said Daddy, 'under any circumstances.'

'She's comin' down,' said Celia as she passed through to the kitchen.

'Shouldn't she have some dinner before dessert?' asked Daddy.

'Not if she doesn't want it,' said Mother. 'There's good food content in Celia's deep dish pie and ice cream. If she wants something later on I'll fix her a cup of soup.'

Virginia came into the dining-room and took her place at the table. Her eyes were red and she sniffled once, but she had control of herself.

'Won't *we* have a feast,' said Daddy.

Virginia nodded. There was never a surfeit of deep dish berry pie with ice cream. Daddy and Virginia always wished they could eat more than their appetites and stomachs would allow. But this time as Celia held the dish and Daddy served himself, Celia said, 'Fraid I got my crust jest a little too well done for Mr. Stewart. Got it out jest in time or I like to burnt it.'

'It looks very nice, Celia,' Daddy said.

Celia came to Virginia and held the dish while Virginia struggled with the awkward serving knife and fork and heaped the pastry on her plate. She took her usual large portion and heaped the white ice cream on top of it. With the first mouthful she could taste the slightly burnt crust. Burnt to a crust. That's what it was — burnt. Burnt alive to a crust.

'She did get it too well done,' said Daddy to Mother. 'Her crust is burnt.'

Virginia choked. The first big mouthful would not go down. She gulped and her cheeks puffed out and she struggled to swallow. It wouldn't go down. You can't eat anything that is burnt. She looked up helplessly.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'Virginia — what *is* the matter?' asked Mother.

Virginia was incoherent.

Ben and Wicky would be burnt to a crust. Suddenly she had a mouthful of Ben and Wicky.

'Use your napkin. Leave the table,' said Mother. 'Don't just sit there, darling, looking ill.'

'What's the matter with her?' Daddy asked.

'Go out in the kitchen,' said Mother.

Virginia pushed back her chair and hurried out to the kitchen. When she had lost the mouthful of berry pie and ice cream she felt better and then almost immediately worse.

'Don't go bein' sick there,' said Celia. 'Go in my bathroom, if you got to be sick.'

Virginia clung to the kitchen sink. 'Oh, my!' she gasped. 'Oh — goodness. I'm not sick. I don't know why — I —'

She took a few breaths through her mouth, and tears ran down her cheeks. Mother came out from the dining-room.

'What struck you, Virginia? Did you swallow something the wrong way?'

Virginia sighed and two more tears trickled down her face.

'I'm not sick now. I was just sick all of a sudden.'

'Well, what are you crying for? You mustn't cry. Is something wrong with you, darling?'

'No, Mother.'

'If you feel badly you tell me.'

'I'll feel all right — in a minute.'

'Give me a towel, Celia,' said Mother.

'Yes'm.'

Mother dried Virginia's eyes and rubbed her mouth. 'What a strange thing to happen to you,' she said. 'I think you must have swallowed too big a mouthful the wrong way. Now take a little water and get your breath back. That's nothing to cry about.'

Virginia swallowed some water.

'Isn't that better? Are you all right now?'

'Yes, Mother.'

'Why, that's the strangest thing,' said Mother. 'If you feel all right you may go back to the table. Poor Daddy's eating all by himself.'

They returned to the dining-room and Virginia sat and stared at the ice cream and berry pie. There was no use in trying to eat it. She didn't even make any pretence of wanting it.

'Delicious,' said Daddy. 'I'm surprised at you.'

Virginia held her breath as long as possible. Eventually Daddy finished and dinner was over and they could leave the table.

'Where are you going, dear?' Mother asked.

'I have to study for a history test,' said Virginia. 'From Madison to Van Buren. I think I'll go do it.'

'All right,' Mother said. 'I'll be up after a while.'

In her room Virginia closed the door and went at once to the balcony. Outside everything was dark. There was no moon at this time and it was impossible to distinguish much below. She stared over the balcony into the darkness. There was soft green grass beneath the balcony — even if she couldn't see it, she knew it was there. It was only about ten feet below. Even if you *fell* off the balcony it couldn't hurt you if you landed on your feet on the grass. She took a deep breath of the cool night air and turned back into her room and closed the door.

She wasn't ill now. That sick feeling in her insides had gone. 'Guts,' she said. She patted her stomach. 'Guts.' Tex had said that insides were guts. It was a relief not to feel ill. Shock and panic had left her. She was able to think about it now. She intended to stay here alone in her own room in order to think. It was almost eight o'clock. Twelve hours from now the arroyo would be a black charred smouldering ruin. Perhaps as early as six o'clock in the morning *they* would go in there with their

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

axes and gasoline torches and turn it into a blazing inferno. If so, there were only ten hours' grace.

Suppose Ben wasn't home in the morning. Often in the mornings he had made his visits to the city dump in order to collect things. He had gotten into the habit of doing that so that he would be home in the afternoons when she went down the trail. Ben might get out to-morrow morning before the enemy arrived. He would be away most of the day and he'd be safe. That was a possibility. But goodness! If he did that he would leave Wicky at home in his cage! He would return to find the place burned to cinders and Wicky burned to death. The twisted battered wreck of the cage would be there in a pile of hot ashes and the poor burned body of Wicky inside it. No — no — that could *never* be. That must not be allowed to happen. Ben must know. He must know in time. How?

She could make some pretence of having to see Claire Ensley. She could say that she had to go over to Claire's house right now in order to ask Claire something about the history test. And then she could slip down the trail in the dark and tell Ben what was going to happen. She needn't go to Claire's at all. Then Mother and Daddy wouldn't know. That would be breaking her promise, but — ? No, that wouldn't work. Mother would suggest that she telephone to Claire. She would never let her walk around to Claire's house in the dark. Something else. What?

She could say that she wanted to talk to Celia about something. She could go through the kitchen to Celia's room and then slip out the back door, rush through the garden and down the trail, warn Ben, and rush home. But that was impossible. That meant breaking the promise. And Mother would never swallow that stuff about wanting to talk to Celia. Virginia never went to Celia's room. Mother would know at once that there was something up. No. There must be some other way. What?

Mother was tapping on the door. 'May I come in?' she called.

'Yes.'

Mother walked into the room.

'Are you all right, darling?'

'Me? Oh — *sure*. I'm all right.'

'You're not sick?'

'Oh, no, Mother. Not a bit.'

'I just wanted to be sure.'

'I was about to study some history.'

Mother sat down.

'Go right ahead. Don't let me disturb you,' she said.

Virginia reached for the American history book. There was nothing else to do. Why didn't Mother go downstairs? She never came in like this and just sat. Virginia read: 'James Madison was inaugurated in 1809.' She read on, sentence after sentence, none of which conveyed any meaning at all. After a long time Mother got up and walked quietly to the door. 'Go right on with your lessons,' she said. 'I'm going down to Daddy. I think you're all right.'

'Oh, yes, Mother.'

Again Virginia was alone. The hour that Mother had sat there while she had pretended to study history had been only ten minutes. It wasn't yet half-past eight. Half-past eight at night to six o'clock in the morning. Nine and a half hours' grace.

'James Madison,' she read, 'was inaugurated in 1809.' The best that could possibly be hoped for was that Ben and Wicky would wake early, see the flames, and run out of the chaparral. That was one possibility. But even then, they would be forced to leave the arroyo for ever. She would never see either of them again. Ben would never know about the gardener idea. It wasn't right to abandon all that. It was a grand scheme and it deserved a trial. It *must* have a trial. And was it all so bad after all — this going down to the arroyo? When Mother hadn't known she was listening Mother had said to Mrs. Harmon, 'It

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

was the cutest thing'. Was something that was 'the cutest thing' really so bad? If it was nothing more dreadful than 'cute' should it be an inviolable promise never to do it again? 'James Madison was born in — no — *inaugurated* in 1809.'

She read on about the War of 1812 and the writing of the *Star Spangled Banner* and the capture of Washington by the British troops. It was funny about the War of 1812. The United States really lost it, but the way it was told you'd think it had been a great victory. Yet the book admitted that the war was badly managed and unpopular with many people and that an enemy force routed the Americans and captured Washington and then set fire to it and burnt it. Did that sound like a great victory? They burnt it — that's what they did. Set fire to it and burnt it. Oh, Ben, Ben, Ben!

At nine o'clock Mother came in again.

'I'm not sick,' said Virginia before Mother was in the room.

'It's just about bed time,' said Mother. 'And I've brought you a cup of hot broth and some wafers. Doesn't that sound good?'

'Yes, Mother.'

'Drink it slowly.'

'It tastes good.'

'That's nice. Are you through with your lessons?'

'I guess so.'

When the broth was gone Virginia went to bed. After she was tucked in Mother was in no hurry to leave. She seemed to know that Virginia was preoccupied with things other than American history, but whenever they talked Virginia sent Ben and Wicky back into the place-where-she-was-alone and they spoke of Dolly Madison.

'I always thought she was a cake,' said Virginia.

'She was the First Lady of the Land,' said Mother. 'Perhaps when you grow up you'll be the First Lady.'

'Think so?'

'Somebody has to be,' said Mother.

'My husband's probably flying a kite,' said Virginia.

Mother laughed and seemed to think the remark was clever. But it was Ben who had said it originally. It just went to show how Mother would appreciate Ben if only she knew him. They talked on at random until the sentences became desultory and Virginia was not aware of Mother's tiptoeing out of the room.

She slept for several hours, a fitful, troubled sleep haunted with irrational dreams of fires and demons and devils and smoke and brimstone. A dozen blocks away a siren whined, coming closer and then fading again. Virginia sat up with a start.

The house was on fire.

No, it wasn't.

Ben's house was on fire.

No — it was still night and she was in bed. Nothing was on fire. Not yet. But that noise? It was the siren of a fire engine. Or maybe only an ambulance. Going away. Not coming nearer. Going, not coming. Her heart was beating fast and her throat was parched. It must be the middle of the night. She found the clock on the night table beside her bed and turned it in order to see the luminous dial. Quarter to twelve. Six hours' grace. James Madison was inaugurated in 1809. Now, what did *he* have to do with it? Oh, yes — history. She had been studying history. Her mouth was dry and she considered getting up and getting a drink of water. Was everybody asleep? Probably.

And down in the arroyo — was everybody asleep? Probably. None of them even guessed that with the dawn, creeping up on them, surrounding them were men with axes and gasoline torches. Suppose Ben never woke up at all? And she could have warned him. She *should* have warned him. She had thought of plans for telling him. The Claire Ensley plan — the Celia plan. She should have tried one of them. Any one. All of them.

Now it was too late. She sat up in bed, wide awake, and listened. Everything was still now. Even the whine of the distant siren was gone.

Ben might die. And if he did it would be her fault. Nobody else's. Just hers. She was the one to help him. And she had failed him. Not yet. There was a chance yet. But that promise. What could you do about that promise? Should you break a sacred promise to Mother and Daddy? Or should you let your best friend die? What would the wisest man in the world do? What would the wisest woman do? What would Mary Sunshine do? Mary — Mary — what shall I do?

Virginia got out of bed. The door was open out on to the balcony. The moon had risen and the deep blackness of the earlier night was touched with a silver glow. It was the same half-moon of the other night, and now it was directly overhead. Virginia whispered, 'Mary — Mary — what shall I do? Please, please tell me. What would you do, Mary Sunshine? Please tell me, Mary.'

She stood quietly in the doorway to the balcony. She had stood that way once before and pretended she had been Mary Sunshine. She'd try it again. Quickly she slipped out of her nightgown and tossed it over the bed. Then she stood naked in the cool breeze and whispered 'Mary — Mary — tell me, tell me — tell me Mary, what to do.' She tossed her head back and clenched her hands at her sides and closed her eyes tightly. Then she began to pivot round and around, supplicating constantly in a whisper, 'Mary — Mary — ' She did this for a full minute until the turning effect began to make her dizzy. She unclenched her palms and snapped her eyes open. She was staring straight out the door and over the balcony rail.

That decided it.

Mary meant her to go. Had she stopped turning and found herself staring inward toward the dark depths of the room, Mary

would have meant stay. No — not stay — but go. Go tell him! Go tell him! Go tell him!

Her movements now were rapid, but calm and quiet. It was settled. No matter what the outcome, it was settled. She found her clothes on a chair. Socks weren't necessary. Leave them. Shoes. No underwear. Only essentials. She put on her white middy blouse and stepped into her navy blue skirt. Just those two garments were enough. Those and shoes. Nobody would know she didn't have on anything underneath. It wouldn't take long. With her shoes on she had to walk lightly. In the night floors creaked in the most unexpected manner, something they never did in the daytime. Creak! There it was. She stooped and undid her shoes and stepped out of them. Then, carrying the shoes in her hand she walked in bare feet out on to the balcony. She leaned over the rail and dropped first one shoe and then the other. Only the slightest thud indicated they had landed on the grass below. She swung one leg over the rail, straddled it, and then clung to the outside. It was a drop into the darkness but the moon gave some indication and she knew exactly what lay below. In order to break the length of the drop she grasped the rail with both hands and let her legs dangle into space, her back to the garden. The position was untenable. She could hold it for only a few seconds and then her arms would tire. Through the railings of the balcony she could see the dark cavernous opening leading into her room. It was too late to go back now. It would be impossible to scramble up again. Gasping with the momentousness of what she was doing she swung her body slightly outward away from the face of the balcony, and let go.

CHAPTER VII
OBLIGATION

I

INSTEAD of being a long fall, a drop through space in the nature of a journey as that of Alice going down the rabbit hole during which there was time to meditate and consider all the possibilities — instead of the titillating sensation of passing rapidly through space — there was hardly time for an instant's thought. It was over before it began. She landed on her heels in the darkness with a jarring impact and fell over backwards on the grass, one arm crushing some of the flowers that grew next to the grass strip. The thud shook her up a bit and she could feel a slight strain at the back of her neck. Her heels stung, too, but they didn't really hurt at all. What hurt more was the fact that she had sat down hard on one of the shoes which had been tossed over the rail. She stood up cautiously and retrieved the shoe. Rubbing her bottom she looked around for the mate, but she couldn't find it.

It *had* to be found. Where on earth was it? She went down on her knees and began to feel with her hands — grass, a leaf, dirt, flowers. There it was, way over there. Why, that was just where she had landed, wasn't it? Funny how hard it was to be sure of things in the dark. She put her shoes on and stood up, and looked at the house. Celia's window was only a few feet away. It was dark. Mother always said Celia slept like a log. Mother had better be right. Now there was no time to think of Celia — or Mother. (What *would* Mother do if she knew this? She must try not to think of the promise now.) Later she would

tell them. Later she would explain it all. Now, it was Ben who had to be considered.

She tiptoed through the garden. When the gravel path crunched under her shoes she walked on the dirt, tramping down flowers. It didn't matter about them. Adachi could fix them somehow. That's what he was for. This was working out all right. It was the only thing to do. When she had warned Ben about the fire and explained to him what was going to happen, and how he could be the gardener, she would come straight back to the house and tell Mother and Daddy just what she had done and why she had broken her promise. Whatever happened then would just have to happen. Ben would be safe. At least that was a certainty. If they wanted to punish her for that — well, even if they locked her up in a bughouse, it would be worth it. She reached the rear hedge and scrambled over it, walking along the edge of the arroyo, past the back of the garage to the trail that led below.

The moonlight made it easy, especially when you knew the way. There's where the trail corkscrewed, there's where the rock was, there's where the gravel was loose. She was almost at the bottom before she remembered that she hadn't made any provisions for getting back *into* the house. It had been easy enough to get out. But you couldn't jump back up to the balcony. She'd have to ring the bell and rouse Mother and Daddy. Could she do that? Perhaps nobody would hear the bell at night. Of course, she intended to explain it all to Mother and Daddy anyway — but not to-night. To-morrow, or the next day. Celia would have to let her in. She would arouse Celia some way, perhaps by throwing gravel on her window, the way that odd boy called Huck Finn always woke up Tom Sawyer when they had adventures at night. Then she'd have to trust Celia not to tell — for to-night, at least. To-morrow she'd tell Mother herself. Here was the chaparral. It was plain to see

where the trail went in. Goodness it was black and scary! Maybe she'd better not — yes, it had to be done. No backing out now. What would Mary Sunshine think? Just because it was dark it wasn't any different than it was in the day time.

'Go on,' she whispered. 'Go on in there. You want to, don't you?' (No — no, I don't. I'm afraid. It's too dark.) 'Certainly I want to. Ben's in there. Wicky's in there. I know where to go. Only babies are afraid of the dark. I know where I'm going.' (Are you sure?) 'Yes.' (Sure?) 'Yes!'

She took three steps forward and disappeared into the chaparral. She couldn't see anything. She groped her way along the trail, one step and a pause, another step and a pause. (Snow White was afraid, too, but there was nothing to be afraid of when the daylight came.) Bushes scratched her, but she groped on, putting her right foot forward and bringing her left up to it. Onward at this snail's pace; right foot, left — right foot, left. Was there no end to it? What was that? Something? An animal?

No sound.

When she tried to move, a bush held her skirt. She had to pull it loose. Right foot, left — right foot, left. Oh! Something touched her face — Oh, just a branch. Her heart was racing the blood through her veins. But she wasn't frightened. (No?) No. Not *very*, that is. Right foot, left — right foot, left. Where was the end?

Something was wrong. She had been going on like this for hours, and it never led anywhere. It wasn't the right trail. But there was only one trail. What had happened to the arroyo?

Here was a place where a little moonlight filtered through. That helped. But right beside her was a big black thing. Jumping at her! It was — oh dear, dear, it was only Gosh's house. It wasn't moving at all. It was the shack Gosh lived in, looking black and square in the night. Gosh was asleep inside. She had

OBLIGATION

come this far, and now Ben's house was only a little farther on. Right foot, left — right foot, left. Gosh's house was behind her. The trail was darker than ever. Another branch tore at her skirt. It must have ripped it. Coming back wouldn't be so hard because Ben would be with her. He'd see her all the way home. He'd probably have some kind of light. It had never occurred to her before what Ben did for a light. Maybe nothing. Right foot, left. I'm coming, Ben — coming. You'll know it soon — soon, Ben.

The complete darkness gave way to the silver glow. She had worked her way out to the sandy area, and a few yards across the soft sand stood the dark mass of Ben's house. Virginia moved quickly across the small clearing to the door of the house. It was closed. From the interior came the noise of Ben breathing — not snoring, but almost snoring — the regular machine-like exhalations that old people make when they sleep.

'Ben!' she whispered.

The breathing continued.

She tapped gently on the door — so gently she could barely hear the taps herself.

The breathing continued.

'Ben,' she said, softly.

What if she couldn't wake him up? Why didn't he answer?

'Ben!' she said in a normal tone of voice. Alone in the moonlight, surrounded by the scrub oak, her voice sounded awfully loud, frighteningly loud. Maybe that wasn't Ben in there. Maybe Ben had gone away and that was somebody else in there. It was a dreadful thought. She didn't know whether to call again or not. If only she were back in her room safe in bed. Was this all real? Was it a dream, after all, and she'd wake up in a minute and it would all be over? It was always such a relief when you woke up and realized that something unpleasant was only a dream. But she wasn't going to wake up

safe in her own bed. She was really standing down in the arroyo bottom in the moonlight while Mother and Daddy thought she was asleep in her room — standing down here with hardly enough clothes on, tapping and saying 'Ben', while Ben slept on, and the whole plan seemed to be failing, to be falling to pieces.

'Ben!' she called, desperately, and at the same time she gave the door a push. It opened a few inches. 'Ben — please wake up,' she said into the doorway, holding her breath and waiting for an answer. She was near the end of her resources. If he didn't answer she wouldn't know what else to do. She wanted to cry, and she knew that she mustn't cry. Dear Ben, please understand. She stood frozen, and the rhythmical breathing inside the shack stopped. Somebody choked and said, 'Eh?' There was a rustling movement and then a voice, unmistakably Ben's voice — (*Really his! Really Ben's!*) — said, 'Who's there? What do you want?'

Virginia half laughed and half cried. 'It's me, Ben. It's Virginia!'

'What? Who's there?'

'Virginia!'

'Well — for — well, I'll be — switched.'

'I had to come, Ben, because —'

'Maybe I'm goin' crazy,' said Ben, still in the darkness of the shack. 'Is that really Virginia?'

'Yes —' Virginia caught her breath and began to cry. 'Ben — they're going to burn you and Wicky with gasolene torches — and I had — to tell you — and — I —' she became incoherent through choked sobs.

Ben opened the door of the shack.

'Well, well, well — my goodness me,' he said. 'If this ain't a surprise for fair. Now — now — you mustn't take on so.' He was still amazed at his sudden awakening and the appearance

of Virginia. He glanced at the moon and decided it must be past midnight. Of just what this nocturnal visit was all about he had no idea. 'Gasolene torches,' had she said? Well, whatever it was, here was Virginia, sure enough, and she was crying as if she were heartbroken and talking words through her tears that didn't make any sense at all. Something had happened to upset her and she wasn't the kind of little girl who got upset over just nothing. He put a hand on her shoulder and he could feel her trembling.

'There, there,' he said. 'There, there — 't ain't nothin' so bad as all that.'

'Yes it is,' she sobbed. 'It's awful, Ben! It's so awful —'

'Now, now —' Ben squatted down beside her and took her in his arms. She buried her face in the ragged shoulder of the coat he had just thrown on. She clung to him, crying, making no attempt to explain anything more, simply surrendering to her pent-up emotion in the sanctuary of his arms.

'There, there,' said Ben, softly. 'It's all right now. Everything's goin' to be all right now.' He held her close with one arm around her waist, and with the other hand he stroked her hair. He touched one of her bare arms and he could feel that she was cold.

'Why, you're shiverin',' said Ben. 'It's too cold for you to come out at night without a coat on.'

She said something, but the words were lost in a sob in the ragged coat's shoulder.

'Sure, sure,' said Ben. 'You just keep on cryin' till you feel like stoppin' and then we'll fix it all up. Why, Wicky'll be wonderin' what we're up to — actin' up out here like this.' His squatted position on his haunches was getting uncomfortable. She was saying something about a garden. 'I reckon you're beginnin' to get cried out some now. Pretty soon the tears won't run no more. Won't that be funny?' He patted her arm

and stroked her shoulders, but she made no move to relinquish him. 'I think we'll move inside,' he said. 'This here's November and it's right chill of nights.' He led her into the shack. 'Be a little warmer in here, and we'll fix a little light and then we'll feel a whole lot better. Yes indeedy — a whole lot better.'

He struck a match and lit a candle. He had no other illumination. The shack had only one or two fragments of furniture — a wobbly table, a hand-made stool, and in one corner the wire cage containing Wicky. The candle was propped in its own wax on a cracked dish. Ben set the dish in the middle of the table and the orange-yellow flame rose and wavered and slowly burned brighter. On the floor along one wall was an old mattress which Ben had restuffed, and on the mattress were several worn blankets. One of them had a large hole burnt in its middle.

'You just set down there on the bed,' said Ben. The candle afforded a fluttering light and shadows moved within the shack as the flame sputtered. 'Here — I reckon this here blanket would be put to better use if it was throwed over your shoulders. How's that?'

Virginia nodded and sniffled. 'Oh, Ben — I love you so much.' She sat down on the mattress and clasped her arms around her knees.

'That's all right,' said Ben. He sat down beside her. 'I reckon it's my fault.'

'*Your* fault?'

'Yes indeedy. I didn't understand about little girls. I didn't think twice like I should of thought before you and I come to be such good friends.'

She moved closer to him and he patted her. 'If I had of thought twice you wouldn't be in this fix now.'

'What fix, Ben?'

'Why — bein' down here all scared and frozen at this hour like

you are now. That's all my fault, Virginia. You ain't to blame.'

'Oh, but Ben, you don't understand!'

'No?'

'No! Understand about why I had to come here to-night, I mean.'

'What is there that riled you up so?'

'They're going to burn it all, Ben, with gasolene torches — and you and Wicky would be burned if I didn't tell you. Fletcher and Mother and Daddy — do you know who Fletcher is? I don't — and because of a little girl named Jo Anne Stevens — in the morning — the first thing it will be is a blazing inferno — and Wicky would be burnt if you weren't here, wouldn't he? — so I came down — and it was Mary Sunshine who did it. I haven't got any clothes on except this skirt and blouse, like Mary Sunshine — and, oh, Ben — can you garden?'

'Well — ' said Ben. 'Now let's see just what is troublin' us most. Who is goin' to burn things up with gasolene torches?'

'They are.'

'They?'

'Policemen.'

'Sure enough,' said Ben. 'Well, now let's see what else we want to know.'

'I jumped off the balcony,' said Virginia.

'Yes indeedy.'

'They gave me a bracelet for not coming down any more. So that's why I didn't — because of my promise, I mean. Do you see, Ben?'

'Oh, yes indeedy.'

'Oh, I knew you'd understand, Ben! I think you're so wonderful!'

'Well — ' said Ben, 'now we got to figure out about gettin' you back home. Wouldn't do for you to stay here all night with me.'

'No?'

'No indeedy.'

'Will you go up with me?'

'Oh, yes indeedy. I'm just a figurin' whether I ought to go an' rouse your Daddy and maybe try to explain this whole thing.'

'To-night?'

'Well — that's the trouble. I could do it, maybe, in the day-time, but in the middle of the night like this it might not work out so well.'

'And you could ask him to give you Adachi's job, Ben. I bet he would, Ben, if he only understood how it was.'

'We'll see — we'll see — you just let me think for a minute, Virginia.'

'Yes, Ben.'

'I got to get out of here anyway if they're a goin' to burn it,' said Ben, thinking aloud. 'But that part's all right because there's no stayin' here with Dean no matter what. Main trouble is gettin' Virginia back without raisin' a fuss and maybe havin' her parents misunderstand how it is and all. I do declare it is kind of a spot to try to figure out sudden-like.'

'Wasn't it right for me to come tell you, Ben?'

Ben put an arm around her, and held her close to him. 'Whatever you done, is all right,' he said. 'You're the best little girl that ever drawed a breath.'

'Better than Mary Sunshine?'

'Better than Mary Sunshine,' declared Ben. 'Your parents know a whole lot more about you than I do, but what I know goes down a lot deeper and is the real thing. I reckon I know what you're gonna be like all your life. I know what you're made of, Virginia, and nobody can ever un-make that. It's finer than fine gold.'

'That's the Bible, Ben.'

'Yes — an' I thought once it was a mistake for you to be

OBLIGATION

growin' up without it. But I was wrong. Don't go studyin' it less'n you want to. Don't never do anything, Virginia, that don't fit right into what you know best. 'Cause you got somethin' better'n all the book-learnin' and brain-thinkin' in the world. You got more'n just *good* sense. You got *pure* sense. That's rare in humans. I know I ain't got it. But you have. Maybe Mary Sunshine had it. I ain't sure. *Pure* sense is the thing that makes you do the absolute right thing, no matter how hard it is for you to do it; or how bad or awful or mistaken it seems like at the time to everybody else in the world. It's somethin' that comes right from the core of you. Or the soul of you. Or the guts of you. Or whatever word there is to pin it down with.'

'The place-where-you're-alone,' said Virginia.

'That's it,' said Ben. 'When you're a growed lady you remember Ben once in a week of Sundays because he really begun to understand you and he really loved you. But if Ben slips your mind a long time from now, that don't matter. Important thing is for you to keep that place-where-you're-alone. It's pure. It won't never fail you. It can't, because it's all the you there is.'

'Ben — you sound as if I'd never see you again!'

'Can't tell now what might happen. We can't go on settin' here until they find us. That wouldn't do. We got to start somethin' soon, and whatever we do, it ain't gonna be easy. Your pure sense carries you right through anything, and it always will. But my good sense is plain scared right now. Listen — thought I heard somethin'.'

They sat in silence for one second, and then the door was abruptly kicked open. They stared up at the figure looming in the doorway. For an instant it was hard to see who it was. Ben didn't move and Virginia didn't move, and the figure stood there, taking in the scene.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'It's begun,' Ben said.

Virginia recognized Dean. For a moment he stared in surprise. The candle sputtered and nearly went out. Dean stepped into the shack and shoved the door closed behind him. He crossed his arms and glared down at Ben and Virginia. Slowly the glare changed to a sneer. Ben's heavy breathing was the only sound in the shack.

II

When Virginia dropped from the balcony to the garden, the house was not asleep as she had supposed. Both Mother and Daddy were still up, and were in the library listening to a midnight news broadcast. Earlier in the evening a crowd of citizens had formed in front of the Inglewood jail and demanded the prisoner who had been arrested for the Jo Anne Stevens murder. At ten o'clock there had been fear of violence as the mob pounded on the door. But the midnight news reporter stated that the crowd had slowly and sullenly dispersed when the sheriff convinced them that the prisoner had been spirited into the county jail some miles away in Los Angeles. The case was in the hands of the law, and mob violence had been avoided.

At twelve-fifteen Daddy turned the radio off and Mother went upstairs. She went to her room and turned on the lights. Before undressing she walked quietly down the hall to Virginia's room. She was reasonably certain that Virginia hadn't really been ill at dinner. Nevertheless, she stepped into the room in the darkness and approached the bed. Before she reached it she knew that something was wrong — she knew that nobody was in the room. An instant later she had the light on. One glance told everything — the empty bed, the nightgown tossed

O B L I G A T I O N

over the foot of it, the missing shoes, the missing clothes, the open door on to the balcony — kidnapped.

She screamed once. . . .

I I I

In the shack, Dean broke the silence.

'She only comes down here to bring you food,' he said.

'It don't matter what you think,' said Ben. 'It ain't so.'

'Get up,' Dean said.

Ben got to his feet. Virginia stood beside him.

'If I didn't see it, I couldn't believe it,' Dean said. He looked at Virginia, 'An undeveloped kid. My God.' And to Ben he said, 'You know what's goin' on in Inglewood to-night?'

'No,' said Ben.

'There's a lynchin' party breakin' into the jail. There'll be one here before morning.'

'You don't understand,' said Ben. 'Virginia's never been here before at night. She found out they was gonna burn us out and she come down to warn us. I ain't hurt her. Nobody has. And you ain't goin' to touch her now.'

'Me? I guess you *are* crazy,' said Dean. 'How long she been here?'

'Not long,' said Ben.

'Get her home,' said Dean. 'Get her home for Christ's sake. Don't stand there.' He turned to the door. 'Wait a minute.' He opened the door and looked out into the darkness. 'Rudy?'

'What's goin' on?' said Rudabaugh's voice.

'Get a load of this,' said Dean.

Rudabaugh came to the door of the shack and looked in. 'Holy jumpin' God!' he exclaimed.

'Just a neckin' party,' said Dean. 'Claims he ain't touched her.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'We better lam out right now,' Rudabaugh said. 'Nothin' worse than this.'

'Wait a minute,' said Dean. 'I got an idea.' And to Ben and Virginia he said, 'You love birds just stay put for a minute'. He turned back to Rudabaugh. 'Maybe we can use it.'

'How?'

'Not sure yet,' said Dean. 'Let's do some fast thinkin'.'

'Too hot to monkey with,' said Rudabaugh.

'Not if we're on the right side,' said Dean.

'Hurry it up,' said Rudabaugh.

'The kid's old man is a tycoon, don't forget.'

'Makes it worse,' said Rudabaugh.

'No —' said Dean. 'How's this: we're comin' home late at night — see the light in the shack — think it's funny — we come over to have a look-see — get here just in time to stop the old guy from givin' her the works?'

'What's it get us?'

'Why,' said Dean, 'we saved the tycoon's daughter from another Inglewood case. If it wasn't for us — why, don't you get it? — Reward, see?'

'Risky.'

'Everything's risky. Want to try it?'

'Can't backfire, can it?'

'No — there's two of us. Don't matter *what* he says.'

'Or the kid?'

'What's the kid know? It's a natural. We'd be dumb to throw it away.'

'What do we do first?' asked Rudabaugh.

'If the old guy had some scratches on his face —' began Dean.

'Where the kid scratched him,' agreed Rudabaugh.

'And the kid's clothes is torn off — or *half* torn off, because we got here just in time,' said Dean, 'how can it miss?'

'But what's the kid gonna say later?'

OBLIGATION

'The word of a ten-year-old kid and a crazy old man against *our* word? And get this: *we'll* call the cops. And for further evidence, who has the kid been comin' down here to see all the time? Us or him? It's fool proof.'

Rudabaugh nodded.

'Let's chance it.'

They looked at Ben and Virginia. He had retreated to the rear of the shack, and he had Virginia partially in back of him.

'You ain't gonna do it,' he said. 'You ain't gonna hurt her.'

Dean walked toward him, and Rudabaugh closed the door of the shack.

IV

The demotion of Tex, which took place with Rudabaugh's arrival in the arroyo, meant that he could no longer live in the shack he had once shared with Heavy and later with Dean. Tex abandoned the place to Dean and Rudabaugh, and moved down and joined Gosh. Whether Gosh liked it or not was of no consequence. He was not consulted. Tex was not sure that he himself would stay in the arroyo much longer. He considered moving farther south, possibly to San Diego and the Mexican border. There was one means of picking up a little quick cash in a border town that had worked before and could be worked again. It was easy and it was fast. You simply walked across the line to the Mexican side of a town like Tiajuana or Mexicali, and you lay in wait for an American. The street lights were bad and the alleys were dark. If you found a drunk it was a cinch to roll him. If you didn't, you could stick up any fellow who happened to come along alone. If he got tough you might have to knock him out. Once he had done that in Agua Prieta. Then you frisk his pockets and walk back across the line to the

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

American side. Even if the fellow sees you later on and recognizes you, he can't do a damned thing about it. Why? Because it happened in Mexico and this here's the United States side. Only chance the fellow had would be to find you again on the Mexican side, and you don't go back for a couple of days. And if he reports it to the Mexican police, what the hell do they care about it? If Americans come across the line they deserve to be robbed.

Or maybe he could find Heavy again and pal along with him. He didn't know which way Heavy had gone. North, maybe, to 'Frisco. Heavy had said there was only one way to handle Dean, and that was the same way as you would handle a rattlesnake. Heavy might still be sore. He was right, though. Damned right. If he could only get Dean just once before scrammin' out. Him and that Rudy, both — then he'd hit the road for San Diego, and maybe go thumbin' it back to Texas, followin' the border route. He thought about it and put it off for a day or two. He was ready to go and he wanted to go, but again he postponed it for a day.

Tex lay in the dark beside Gosh. He dreamt that Dean was fleeing in panic and he was pursuing him. They came to the edge of the arroyo, but the cliff was sheer and the trail had been removed. Dean got down on his knees and begged Tex not to hurt him. Tex measured the distance and then kicked Dean in the face, and Dean went over backwards and over the cliff, screaming like hell as he went. Tex turned and started for Tiajuana and the yelling continued. He awoke with a start. It had all been a Goddamn dream — too bad — but the yelling was real because there it came again. What the hell was it? He crawled to his feet, and Gosh woke up.

'Jesus — hear that?' asked Tex.

'What happened?' said Gosh.

'Sounds like Ben must have went crazy! I'm gonna go see.'

OBLIGATION

He stumbled out of the shack. Above, on the trail from the lot, were lights — flashlights playing over the switchback as three figures hurried down the trail. Through the chaparral to the west the headlights of an automobile flashed and a red spotlight played over the scrub oak. Somewhere up above a siren began to whine, coming closer rapidly.

‘What the hell?’ thought Tex. ‘Am I nuts?’

To the north, on the top of the Devil’s Gate Dam, an automobile stopped, and a spotlight was turned and played below on to the chaparral.

‘What in the name of Christ?’ muttered Tex. ‘Cars on the golf course — cars on the dam — fellows comin’ down the trail. Police cars — cops —’ He groped along the trail toward Ben’s shack. ‘Jeepers creepers.’

V

Radio Patrol Officers Cahn and Redburn met Edward Stewart where the private road turned in from Arroyo Drive. They abandoned the car and hurried across the lot to the arroyo edge. After a moment the three of them found the trail and started down. As they descended they could see the white headlights and the red spotlight of a sheriff’s car across the arroyo near El Encanto Country Club. Officer Gibbs and Detective-Lieutenant Ryland took the dirt road across the golf course, speeding the sheriff’s car toward the sixth green. Radio Patrol Officers Thomassin and Murdock, following broadcast orders, stopped their car on the top of the Devil’s Gate Dam and turned the spotlight below on the chaparral.

All the lights of the Stewart house, inside and out, were on. Margaret Stewart rushed out to the garden and peered below, while Celia paced back and forth in the house not knowing

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

whether to pray to Jesus or Aimee Semple McPherson, or St. Germain.

The siren of the police ambulance whined through the empty residential streets, and the driver turned the car on to Palm Drive and raced it toward Arroyo Drive.

Officers Cahn and Redburn, followed by Edward Stewart, plunged into the chaparral, following the trail by flashlight, and came upon Gosh's shack with Gosh trembling in the doorway.

'Where'd they go?' Cahn demanded.

'Th — that way,' pointed Gosh.

They hurried on, and Redburn dragged Gosh along with them.

VI

Virginia had never known terror. The complete soul-racking experience of seeing the world go mad before your eyes was unknown. Fear, yes. She had been afraid in the past; she had been afraid to-night. She had been afraid when Dean kicked open the door, and she had been afraid when he and the strange one called Rudy talked together and then advanced into the shack. But that fear was a mild breeze compared to the tornado of panic and horror that immediately broke loose. They wanted to kill Ben. For some inexplicable, unaccountable reason, Dean was suddenly hurting Ben, and the other one was reaching for her.

She screamed when Dean hit Ben in the face. And as she caught her breath to scream again she could hear the sickening impact of Dean's knuckles on flesh. Ben collapsed, and his weight shook the flimsy little shack like an earthquake. As Ben went down the other one was trying to tear her clothes. The crash of Ben's weight upset the candle. It rolled off the table and landed on the floor, and the shack was in darkness.

O B L I G A T I O N

'Don't let her yell!' Dean was saying.

A hand seized her by the back of the neck, and fingers clamped over her mouth. Her mouth had been open to scream again, and when she couldn't scream she bit down as hard as she could on the fingers. The hands gripping her let go, and a voice said, 'Jesus!'

'Wait'll I make a light,' said Dean's voice.

'It ain't gonna work,' said Rudabaugh. 'Damn near bit my hand off. Let's drop it and scram.'

'Not now,' said Dean. He struck a match and held it high. Virginia was crouched in terror on the mattress. The flickering light showed Ben lying on his side on the floor. The left side of his face was bloody and his eyes were open and staring.

'Ben! Ben!' shrieked Virginia, trying to crawl to him.

'It won't work,' said Rudabaugh. 'It's too crazy.'

'Listen,' said Dean.

They heard the siren of the police ambulance.

'We got a chance,' insisted Dean. 'It's us two against them. Go out and meet the cops half way.'

Rudabaugh yanked open the door and saw a figure approaching. 'Hey — officers — give us a hand here,' he said, and then he saw that the figure was Tex.

'What the hell's goin' on?' asked Tex, peering into the house. In the flickering light of the burning match he had a glimpse of Ben and Dean and Virginia. 'Great God! Who done what?'

'Shut him up,' commanded Dean. The match began to burn his fingers and he whipped it out.

'Listen here, you,' said Rudabaugh.

Dean came out of the shack and saw the spotlights trained on the chaparral. 'Tex,' he said, thrusting Rudabaugh aside, 'the old guy tried to kill the girl — d'y'understand?' He grabbed Tex by a shoulder. 'D'y'understand!'

'You guys let go o' me!' yelled Tex.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

In the darkness Virginia groped toward Ben. She felt his coat and she gasped as one of her hands touched warm sticky blood. She was sure he was dead. Dean had murdered him — murdered him. She wasn't screaming, but sobbing violently, quivering in panic and hysteria. Time had stopped. The world had gone forever. There was nothing anywhere but terror. Nothing made sense any more. Things just happened without reason — like the flashlights and the voices and the vague figure of a policeman looking in at her, and Daddy — Daddy right in the middle of all this! — Daddy shoving the policeman aside and rushing into the shack and grabbing her.

'They hit him!' Virginia shrieked. 'Daddy — Daddy — he's all blood — he's all blood, Daddy!'

Daddy lifted her and held her and tried to calm her, and outside she could hear Dean saying, 'We saved her, officer. The old guy tried to tear her clothes off and —'

'That's a damn lie!' said Tex.

'I broke my promise — I broke my promise,' sobbed Virginia. On the floor Ben groaned.

'He's *not* dead — Daddy, he moved!'

Daddy didn't say anything. He had his arms around her and he held her so tight that it hurt. Then he pulled her toward the door.

More policemen and more flashlights. Somebody was helping Ben off the floor. He could hardly stand. She stared back at Ben as the policeman held him, and Daddy led her out of the shack.

Flashlights, uniforms, a revolver.

'Don't anybody move,' said a voice.

A flashlight beam showed Gosh lying on the sand. Then the beam fell on Dean.

'He hit Ben!' Virginia screamed.

'The kid's off her nut,' said Dean.

O B L I G A T I O N

'You're all under arrest,' said a policeman.

'How bad she hurt?' asked another.

More lights. A policeman with a shot gun. A siren coming nearer. A man who wasn't a policeman said quietly, 'I'll take charge here —' and played a flashlight from one to another in turn, and asked, 'This the father?'

'I'm Edward Stewart.'

'Detective-Lieutenant Ryland,' said the man. 'How's the child?'

'Hysterical,' said Daddy. 'I don't know what —'

'Who hit this man?' asked Ryland, pointing to Ben.

'I did, officer,' said Dean, 'to keep him from —'

'It's a lie!' said Tex. 'I scen 'em.'

In the darkness on the far side of the clearing Gosh crawled into the chaparral.

'Gibbs, Cahn, and Redburn,' said Ryland. 'Place everybody under arrest. Thomassin get here?'

'Up on the dam,' said Cahn. 'Control told him to stand by, I guess.'

The whine of the ambulance sounded near. It had circled around to the golf club and cut across the dirt road to the sixth green. 'There's Barton,' said Ryland. 'Go show him the trail, Gibbs. Bring the stretcher.'

'Ben! Ben!' sobbed Virginia.

'Who's Ben?' asked Ryland.

'Me, sir.'

'Did you steal this child?'

'No, sir.'

'Yes, he did,' said Dean.

'We saw him,' said Rudabaugh.

'They're liars,' said Tex, spitting blood.

'The child ain't hurt, Mr. Stewart,' said Ben.

'Did this man touch you, Virginia?' asked Daddy.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'He did,' said Virginia, pointing at Rudabaugh.

'Oh, Christ!' said Rudabaugh. 'It was *his* idea.' He pointed at Dean.

'The old guy attacked the child,' said Dean.

'It's a damn lie!' yelled Tex. 'He done it himself. I seen him. How d'y'like *that*, Dean?'

'All right — all right. Everybody shut up,' said Ryland. 'Cahn and Redburn, you take these two men.' He indicated Rudabaugh and Dean. 'Gibbs and I will take these.' He touched Ben and pointed to Tex. 'You'll want to go along in the ambulance with the child, Mr. Stewart?'

'Ambulance? Is it necessary to —'

'Examination. Too many stories. Where the hell's Barton?'

'He's here,' said a policeman, leading the ambulance attendant up to the knot of men.

'Don't let them hurt Ben!' sobbed Virginia. 'Daddy, don't let them hurt Ben!'

'Can she walk?' asked Barton.

'Put her on the stretcher,' said Ryland. 'What the hell did you come for? Gibbs'll help you. Cahn — call in and tell control to release Thomassin.'

The man called Barton tried to take Virginia away from Daddy, and in the moving and criss-crossing flashlight beams Virginia searched for Ben. Then she saw him. A policeman had him. 'Ben — where's Wicky?' she called. But Daddy passed between them and she lost Ben in the darkness. Then she knew that she wasn't going to see Ben again. Not to-night. Not to-morrow. Never. Never again.

'Ben! — Daddy —' she screamed. She fought against the man called Barton. She tried to break away from Daddy. 'He can be the gardener — he can be the gardener —' she tried to explain.

'Hysterical,' a voice said.

OBLIGATION

'Lay her on the stretcher,' somebody said.

'Easy there.'

'Ben didn't get Wicky!' she screamed. 'Wicky's still there. They'll burn him! They'll burn him!'

She was being lifted and held, and carried and held — hands, strangers, voices, lights, while she talked all the time and tried to explain and nobody listened and she cried and sobbed and begged them to listen, and all the time they kept going somewhere, moving on in the darkness of a world made up entirely of night and flashlights and uniforms and a face here and a face there — round faces, big faces, little faces, strange faces — bumping along in a bed on wheels and a siren whining, whining somewhere ahead — or was it behind? — but you never caught up with it so maybe it wasn't real.

Phantasmagoria of a reeling world, of men in white and a sick pungent smell and steel instruments and somebody rubbing her arm with cotton and time passing by.

Tick-clunk. The hand jumped a minute. A minute went by, and forever went by and forever was laughing because it wasn't real. It wasn't even real. It didn't make any material difference. Forever, and forever, and forever. Foocy, foocy, and ka-foocy. Happy birthday, Claire Ensley, happy birthday to you.

She was vomiting into a white bowl held by a white nurse in a white room. In a white world? It was the anise cookies. She shouldn't have eaten the tenth one, but should have saved it for Ben and Wicky —

Ben and Wicky!

Oh, dear God — Ben and Wicky! Dear God, save Ben and Wicky —

But God's not an old man with white whiskers. ('He's not?') No — he's not even got a white robe. That's just the way little boys and girls think about God.

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

That's the way Mother looked. That was Mother's face looking down at her — Mother breathing on her — Mother's face next to hers. And Daddy's, too. Then a white nurse. Mother, Daddy, nurse.

('Is there a God in *me*?')

Now you're catchin' on. You can't get away from God because there ain't nothin' nowhere but God.

('I'm the same way. Tell me some more!')

So there ain't nothin' real except that place-where-you're-alone. That's all there is.

('— bushes and trees and black widow spiders?')

They ain't.

('But you're real, Ben.')

Only in that place-where-you're-alone. That's all there is.

('None of the rest?')

None of the rest.

That's why Forever laughed. Time and Forever knew it wasn't real. Then it can't hurt. If it's not real it can't hurt. (Oh, of course, it's real in a *way*. Don't be silly. But not *really* real because there is something more than just all that.) Out there. That can't hurt you. Not now.

Now you're catchin' on. Look at me. Ben's eye. ('Bens-eyesGod'n'I'). I won't take it into my head to jump off that-there Colorado Street bridge the way a lot of folks has done.

('Neither will I.')

Why?

Let's say it together: All that is real is the place-where-you're-alone. That's all there is.

Didn't she wear anything? Not even one single *stitch*?

Pure sense is the thing that makes you do the absolute right thing. Comes right from the core — guts — soul — whatever word there is.

O B L I G A T I O N

(‘The-place-where-you’re-alone.’)

That’s it.

Not a single stitch?

Not a single stitch. Why should she?

CHAPTER VIII

A LAW OF PROBABILITY

FROM the county jail you walk out of the civic centre of Los Angeles, northward on Broadway. When you come to the Los Angeles river you go down beneath the overpass and you follow the Santa Fe railroad tracks and the Union Pacific railroad tracks past Sycamore Grove. You're really in the arroyo then and all you have to do is to keep stayin' with it and you don't pay no attention to streets or railroads after that. You stay in the bottom and keep passin' under bridges and streets and culverts and such while the bottom twists and turns for some miles. Then ahead you see the abutments of the Colorado Street bridge. You walk under it like you did the first time you come into the arroyo, and then, just like that first time, you come to the Rose Bowl.

You slow up a little because you wonder how it's goin' to look up yonder, and pretty soon you know. You stand still and look around. The golf course is the same and the sides of the arroyo are the same, and so are the houses where the rich folks live. Up ahead the Devil's Gate Dam is still there, forming a barricade across the arroyo three or four blocks farther north.

But where the chaparral was — that's all different. There ain't no chaparral no more. Not even a twig.

There's a broad flat empty burnt-off place. It's covered with black sooty ashes and charred roots and as you walk over it a grey-black dust rises behind you. It's a naked dead place without even a weed or a blade of grass living in it. Once in a while there's a battered can or a picce of broken glass. You can walk on to the middle of it and look all around and with one good look you can see the whole place where the chaparral used to be.

A LAW OF PROBABILITY

Up near the base of the dam a motor chugged. A man was running a tractor over the burnt area, backing and starting, ripping, pulling and ploughing up the burnt ash. The ash has had thirty days to cool off and the dust is getting fine. Once an eddy of wind scooted across the charred surface and sucked a whirling spiral of grey dust along with it. It blew out over the golf course and the dust disappeared.

Over on the seventh tee a man was sitting. He wasn't a golfer. You could tell that at once. He had been watching Ben for some time. It looked like — Ben wasn't sure and he walked slowly across the black ash toward the tee — why, yes it was. It was Gosh. He was sitting on the grass and he looked at Ben with interest.

'Well,' said Ben.

Gosh opened his mouth to speak.

'Surprise,' said Ben, squatting down beside Gosh.

'Yeah,' said Gosh.

'Changed it a lot, didn't they?' said Ben.

'Yeah.'

'Where you stay?'

'Over there,' said Gosh, nodding toward the distant club house.

'Good place?'

'Gosh — no. But I ain't gonna leave.'

'Sure,' said Ben. 'What you got?'

Only room for one.'

'Yeah?' said Ben.

'Ain't like it was,' explained Gosh. 'No room for nobody else.'

'Only room for one,' said Ben.

'Yeah,' said Gosh. Then he asked timidly, 'Been in jail?'

'Vagrancy,' said Ben.

'How?'

'Thirty days,' said Ben. 'We all got just the same. Where was you?'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'That night?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Oh — around. They feed you good?'

'Pretty good,' admitted Ben. 'Where was you?'

'I stayed in the bushes,' said Gosh. 'They all went away. I stayed all night. They didn't come back.'

'When they do the burnin'?'

'Next day. Wanta see where your place was?'

'Well — maybe — ' said Ben.

'I can show ya.'

'Maybe — '

'I like to show ya.'

Gosh stood up and walked from the tee across the burnt area. Ben followed.

'It was here.'

'Yeah,' nodded Ben. 'This is it.' He scuffed his heel in the debris. A few feet away was the remains of the wire cage.

'You know what happened to him?' Ben asked.

'No.'

'Well — ' said Ben, staring down at the cage.

'Fella came through and looked in all the houses before they set fire to it,' said Gosh. 'Had a axe and kinda took a lick or two at 'em. So I left.'

'Fella look careful in the houses?'

'Well — ' said Gosh, considering, 'he looked. Then they set fire. It took a whole day to burn.'

Ben stooped over and picked up the cage. It was crushed out of shape and one wall was missing. He dropped it.

'Maybe — maybe he got away,' he said.

'No,' said Gosh, miserably. 'No chance.'

'I think maybe he got away,' said Ben, nodding.

'No. Got burnt,' said Gosh.

'You sure — for a fact?'

A LAW OF PROBABILITY

'No —'

'Well — I like to think he got away.'

'Couldn't,' said Gosh. 'All burnt up.'

'You coulda come an' got him,' said Ben.

'I coulda,' said Gosh, beginning to whimper. 'But I didn't think of it.'

'Sure,' said Ben. He scuffed his shoe in the debris of ashes — a few pieces of twisted metal, some broken glass.

'You won't find nothin',' said Gosh. 'I already looked.'

'Well,' said Ben. 'It's a law of probability. Maybe he did. Maybe he didn't.'

'Poor little fella,' said Gosh.

'Just a law of probability,' said Ben.

'A — what?'

'Fifty-fifty,' said Ben. 'Guessin' yes.'

Ben kicked aside more ashes. He had exposed part of a small oblong metal box. He scooped ashes aside and pulled the box free. Once it had been covered with black soot. Gosh was interested. Ben tried to raise the lid. The hinge at the back had been melted down. With considerable effort Ben managed to break the lid loose. Inside were the remains of a shaving set.

'Gosh,' said Gosh.

'Ruined,' said Ben. 'No good. Maybe I oughta return it just the same.'

'Was a pretty fancy one onc't,' said Gosh. 'Yours?'

'Nopc.'

Ben closed the lid. 'Well — guess I'll be moseyin'.'

'I'm stayin',' declared Gosh.

'What for?'

'I can still find golf balls off'n the course. Sell 'em. I got two dimes right now.' He plunged a hand in a pocket and brought out the coins. They lay in the palm of his hand and shone in the sunlight. He considered Ben for a moment and said, 'If you

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

wanta stay — there's a way of gettin' under the golf house. Nobody round at night much. I stay there every night. Can't stand up, but you can lie down.'

'Guess not,' said Ben.

Gosh was disappointed. Now that there was no danger of Ben's wanting to take possession of his refuge he felt more fraternal. 'You could stay a night or two. See how you like it,' he urged.

'Nope.'

'They got garbage cans there. Sometimes there's stuff in 'em that ain't never been used. Good stuff. Only you got to do it in the dark when everybody's gone.'

'Goin' inland,' said Ben. He gave the wreck of the cage a gentle push with his foot. 'Decemember's cold on the coast. Damp cold.'

'Where at?'

'Arizona — around Phoenix. Warmer there.'

'Well — all right,' said Gosh, giving up. 'If you *wanta*. I ain't leavin'. I ain't gonna leave at all.' He took a step back and crossed his arms in a gesture of finality.

Ben looked up toward the arroyo top. He could see the hedge and the rear of the garage, but not the house. He started to walk across the burnt area toward the trail to the top, carrying the charred box under his arm.

'Goin' now?' asked Gosh.

'Guess so,' said Ben. 'Luck.'

'So long,' said Gosh. He stood still and watched Ben cross the black ground. He continued to stand staring in the sunlight as Ben ascended the trail. To the north the tractor chugged and panted and rasped. It cut back and forth across the ash-strewn ground, raising a cloud of grey-black dust in its wake. Each lateral journey brought it a few feet nearer. When Ben reached the arroyo top Gosh waited to see if he would look back. He

didn't. Gosh turned and walked back to the seventh tee and sat down on the grass.

Ben contemplated the Stewart house. What day was this? Wednesday. She'd be in school at this hour. Might not be anybody home. Might be a good thing to pass right by. Still — here was this box. It wasn't any good. But still, that didn't have anything to do with it — whether it was still any good or not. It could be left — and maybe a word or two — just somethin' to go by. Just to hear something. Yes indeedy.

He crossed the lot to Arroyo Drive and entered the private road and walked to the back door. He hesitated for a second and then knocked. Everything was quiet inside. He looked around. There was her play house. And the grass, and beyond the grass the flower garden. They would have some poinsettias by Christmas. Right nice ones. Up above, off the second story, was that balcony. Why, she might have hurt herself bad by jumping off of that in the dark. Footsteps in the kitchen. Somebody was coming. Now he noticed a push button beside the door. He could have rung. Hadn't seen it before so — here was somebody. Through the screen door, in the shadow of the screen porch, he saw Celia.

'How de do?' he said formally.

'Don't want nothin',' said Celia.

'I — I knocked before I saw that-there button,' he said.

'You sellin' somethin'?' asked Celia.

'No, ma'am. I just —'

'Oh, my goodness!' said Celia, seriously. 'Are you that one?'

'I'm Ben.'

'What you want now? She ain't here. You better go 'way 'fore I call somebody.'

'T'ain't nothin' to get excited about,' said Ben. 'I'm a goin' right along. I just wanted to ask —'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'If they catch you hangin' around here again they'll send you to jail for life. Said so.'

'I won't stay,' said Ben. 'I won't be comin' again, but I'd just like to ask a friendly word about — about —'

'Miss Jinya?'

'Yes, ma'am,' he said, gratefully.

'If Mrs. Stewart knew I was talkin' to you she'd take my head off.'

'You could say I was somebody else — and while you're sendin' me away just say what — what —'

'I'll tell you,' said Celia. 'They went an' took her screamin' an' hysterical to the hospital right in the middle of the night. I stayed here all alone and Mrs. Stewart, she went, and Mr. Stewart, he'd already went in the ambulance with her. They said there was blood on her, and her clothes was in shreds and all those men down there tellin' like they had took turns usin' her till you couldn't make out who done it or how many done it and when they got her to that hospital with doctors and nurses examinin' her they says there ain't a scratch on this child, she ain't been touched by nobody.'

'Yes indeedy. I know that, but —'

'Jest a miracle, that's all,' continued Celia. 'Ascended Masters seen the light and the truth and they lifted that child right up into their care and protected her from evil. I told Mrs. Stewart how I seen it an' even *she's* got to admit that it was jest a miracle.'

'Yes indeedy — but —'

'So they kept her there in that hospital three days to get her quieted down because jest nerves is all that's ailin' her and then they brung her home here and put her in her own bed and she could smell how they had burnt out the arroyo bottom and she like to have had the hysterics all over again — and the grievin' she suffered, why it was like she'd lost a relative. Cryin' and sick and for a while they even thought they might have to get you

out of jail just to see if that would help her some. But they decided against that and the doctor says to get her away from the scene of it all to some place where she sees all new things and places and people until she forgets all this goin' on here. So that's what they did straight off.'

'They sent her away?'

'They got her quiet again and they took her off to one of these-here private schools for girls and they had to do some shoppin' for one because the first two they tried wouldn't have her on account of the scandal and all.'

'Scandal?' said Ben, in surprise.

'Why, sure, all them newspapers had it writ up like that little girl that got killed down in Inglewood and Mr. Stewart's suin' one of 'em with a big law suit for sayin' some of the things they printed. He says they tried to make it ten times as worse as it was so they can sell more papers. Why, Mrs. Stewart is still thinkin' they might have to move right out of Pasadena in order to get rid of it all. It's the worst thing that's ever happened in their whole lives. An' all on account of you.'

'Where —' said Ben, 'where did they take —'

'I ain't tellin',' declared Celia. 'It ain't no business of yours where she is. I'd cut my tongue out 'fore I'd tell you.'

'That's right,' said Ben. 'I don't want to know. I don't need to know. I know where she really is. I know where she'll always be.'

Celia peered at him through the screen.

'They said they thought you was a little crazy,' she nodded. 'You ever get fits?'

'Well — thank you right kindly. Oh — this-here. If you give this-here box to Mr. Stewart some time, I'll be much obliged to you.'

Celia looked at it suspiciously. 'What's in it?'

'It's his.'

VIRGINIA'S DOUBLE LIFE

'No rats?'

'No — no rats.'

Celia opened the screen door and accepted the box and quickly closed the door again. Ben stepped away. He took one look at the play house. Then, without looking at Celia, he walked down the private road to Arroyo Drive.

Celia hurried to the front of the house and watched him go. He passed along Palm Drive and was out of sight. One long block brought him to the end of the street car line.

'Funny — *that* day I should get on *that* car and then all *that* starts to happen,' he told himself. 'Well — it's all over now — unless maybe for her it's just the beginnin' of somethin'. Prob'ly so. Shouldn't be surprised. Just the beginnin' of somethin'.'

South toward Colorado Street to find the Foothill Boulevard east for Arizona. Sudbury Avenue — Maple — Larchmont — 'That's where I got on. There it begun; here it ends. No use feelin' sad. Everything ends some time. Why, 't'ain't every man who's knowed *two* great women in his life. One with good sense; one with pure sense. All gold. Finer'n gold. Finer'n pure gold.'

